

26 November 2007

Ms W Woodcock
Director of Children's Services
Wokingham Borough Council
Civic Offices, PO Box 156
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Wokingham
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Dear Ms Woodcock

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

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment (APA) for your local authority. The judgements in the letter draw on your review of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) where it was available, 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

Wokingham Borough Council consistently delivers services above minimum requirements in most areas. Following the appointment of the new Corporate Head of Children's Services there is noticeably stronger leadership and effective communication and collaboration between teams within the local authority. Children and their families are well supported in becoming and remaining healthy. The Local Safeguarding Children Board is working effectively. Improvements have been made in relation to the monitoring and follow up of children in local authority care but too many are still placed at a distance from Wokingham. The number of school days missed by this group of children is still too high. The standards reached by children in local authority primary and secondary schools are very good and improvements have been made in reducing fixed-term and permanent exclusions. Good services are provided for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their families. The consultation and involvement of young people is good and children's services are making a very good contribution to the well-being of children and young people and their families. A high percentage of children remain in education, employment or training post 16.

Being healthy

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas of development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. Children and families in the borough are supported well in promoting and enjoying good health. A high proportion of mothers breast-feed, and a lower than average percentage of expectant mothers smoke. The local authority has made very good progress in several key areas, such as achieving targets in reducing substance misuse and reducing teenage pregnancy rates. Ninety percent of schools are participating in the Healthy Schools Programme, which is higher than similar local authorities. The increasing participation in this programme provides good opportunities for further strengthening work concerning healthy eating and combating childhood obesity. An increased take-up of school meals and higher nutritional standards have been achieved following the appointment of a new school meals contractor.

Effective leadership is being built through the improvements made to organisational arrangements, such as the implementation of the Joint Commissioning Board. Good work has progressed between schools and the Primary Care Trust (PCT) relating to baseline measurement of children's weight and in establishing 'drop-in' health centres in some schools. The majority of children and young people state that they have never taken drugs and reported patterns of drinking and smoking are similar to the national average. Key posts have been filled to enhance local provision of alcohol misuse and sexual health services. Consultation is underway to develop integrated youth services and to develop a parenting strategy. An innovative project for good support to young mothers has been established and sustained. Consultation about service development is used well with children, families, staff and stakeholders.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are currently provided through partnership arrangements with West Berkshire PCT and two other local authorities. Complex financial arrangements and pressures in respect of the effective pooling of budgets have resulted in some key posts within the service being frozen. As a result of these difficulties, the local authority is currently undertaking a review of CAMHS provision against a revised strategy to prioritise preventative services and to improve access to these services, particularly for schools, through the development of locality and neighbourhood CAMHS teams.

Very good progress has been made in developing a single one-stop-shop service for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, about which parents are very positive. The health needs of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are now addressed through a single co-located multi-disciplinary service incorporating special education statementing and placement services, disabled children's social care and respite services for children with chronic medical needs.

Immunisation rates for children who are looked after are good and improvements have been achieved in the completion of their annual health and dental checks. The rate of improvements in these areas does not yet match the rate of progress nationally. The combined work of all local services in securing the health of children and young people is good.

Areas for development

- Ensure that there is continued improvement in the completion of annual health and dental checks for children who are looked after in order to reach the good levels achieved nationally.
- Improve the provision of locally based CAMHS.

Staying safe

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas of development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate.

The local authority's child protection practices have been reviewed externally, following last year's APA, which highlighted weaknesses in service provision, management and processes. The independent review of safeguarding revealed further areas of concern and a few instances where decisions in child protection were unsafe. The local authority has taken appropriate steps to address these weaknesses such as the roll-out of a comprehensive training programme for key staff involved in child protection and revising their child protection procedures which have been made more readily accessible and in a variety of formats. Data collection is now timely and accurate and its importance is increasingly understood by all, including fieldworkers. Performance management systems are improving steadily.

The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) was established on time and an independent LSCB chair has been recruited. It is concentrating its efforts in key areas appropriately. In particular, the work of the Quality Standards sub-committee is strong. The LSCB has enquired seriously about why there are proportionately fewer children placed on the Child Protection Register than similar local authorities and the national average. In response, the local authority has taken several appropriate initiatives, namely, in developing a broader concept of safeguarding, analysing case conferences, developing strategic links with Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements locally and in considering carefully the issue of hidden harm.

The rate of child protection referrals is low in comparison with similar local authorities and the national average and a low proportion of these proceed to initial assessment. The percentage of core assessments completed within the required timescales has improved this year but is still below that of similar local authorities.

All children who are looked after have a named social worker, which continues previous good performance. Good practice is indicated where a high proportion of children who are looked after are involved in their statutory reviews. A new structure for delivering foster care has been introduced. The management of fostering has been improved with appropriate respite care for foster carers and more thorough training for managing children they foster. New leadership and a clear corporate parenting strategy for looked after children and young people is being put in place and a central placement team is being appropriately developed for commissioning and risk assessment. As was the case in 2006, there are a relatively small number of children who are looked after, most having multiple and complex needs. Compared with similar local authorities and the national average, a disproportionately high number are placed at a considerable distance from their family home. In response to the need to plan for and commission more local services for children who are looked after, the local authority is actively looking at alternatives, such as the provision of small group homes in the Wokingham area. There continues to be a key deficit in performance on the stability of placements of these children in comparison to similar local authorities and the national average.

The local authority has developed a good multi-agency anti-bullying strategy group and in surveys and school inspections pupils say they generally feel safe in school and in the community.

Areas for development

- Improve the timeliness of initial and core assessments.
- Continue to review thresholds in respect of low numbers of children and young people on the Child Protection Register and low numbers of referrals that lead to an initial assessment.
- Ensure that children who are looked after have placements nearer to their family homes as soon as practicable and that stability of placements is improved.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas of development

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

A good reduction in surplus places in the primary sector has been achieved and, with one secondary school closing, fewer surplus places will exist in the secondary sector. The range of childcare provision is good and sustained at a high level, with no actions required at registration and few actions required at subsequent inspections. The majority of childcare settings were judged as good in Ofsted inspections, a higher percentage than similar local authorities or nationally, providing a good start to young children's learning. A high percentage of nursery inspections judged

teaching to be good or better and standards reached by the end of the Foundation Stage are above expectations generally. At Key Stage 1, standards in reading and writing at Level 2 are above the national average and well above the national average in mathematics, a consistent pattern over the last four years. In Key Stage 2 at Level 4 and above, the standards in English, mathematics and science have reflected an upward trend and standards reached are also above the national average. The contextual value added from Key Stage 1 to 2 is a little over the national average.

At Key Stage 3, standards in English and mathematics are similarly above national averages and well above in science. The local authority was ranked fourth in the country in mathematics and eleventh in science in 2006. In Key Stage 4 the number of pupils with five or more grades A*-C at GCSE, including English and mathematics was 58% in 2006, significantly higher than the national average. The contextual value added from Key Stage 2 to 4 was lower than the national average, although this was distorted by two schools. Robust action has been taken in relation to these and no secondary schools were below the floor targets in GCSE in 2006. No schools inspected were subject to special measures and the one primary school given a notice to improve was re-inspected and judged good. This is better than similar local authorities and the national picture. The overall effectiveness of primary schools was judged by inspectors to be good or better in 74% of inspections. In secondary schools, 40% were judged to be good or better. The support and challenge for schools by officers is good and a number of initiatives ensure that schools continue to make good progress. Careful consideration is given to supporting schools with the new early years profile, as well as helping schools to model good practice in shared flexible provision for students at Key Stage 5. Teaching and learning was judged more effective in primary than in secondary schools but was always satisfactory or better, although the very small number of secondary inspections distorts the statistics. Similarly, leadership and management were mostly good or better in primary schools.

In primary schools attendance is marginally above similar local authorities and the national average and in secondary schools it is in line with other local and national levels. Although the attendance of children who are looked after is tracked and monitored, for those who miss 25 days or more, it remains higher than that of children in similar local authorities and above national figures. Fixed-term exclusions for primary and secondary aged pupils is lower than the national average but permanent exclusions in the secondary sector are higher, although falling significantly in 2006, largely due to the focus of the secondary behaviour strategy team. Fixed-term exclusions for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, although lower than the national average overall, have risen and are higher in secondary and special schools than primary schools. The emotional literacy project is having an impact in Wokingham in terms of reducing poor behaviour and keeping pupils in school. The pupil referral unit also manages some effective outreach work. Since September 2007, pupils identified as at risk of exclusion are put forward for a managed move and provided with extra learning support to ensure that they are not ultimately excluded. This has been achieved with the agreement of the admissions

forum, who have established new fair protocols for in-year admissions and exclusions procedures. A rapidly improving pattern of education provision of over 20 hours per week is given to pupils who do not attend school because of exclusion, putting the local authority in the best quartile for this indicator. A higher percentage of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are placed in maintained schools than other local authorities, ensuring good inclusion. Statements of special educational need are prepared for all children and young people within 18 weeks, which is better than similar local authorities. Sufficiently robust procedures are in place for monitoring children who are educated at home by parental choice.

Areas for development

- Reduce further the number of pupils permanently excluded from secondary and special schools, particularly those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Achieve better attendance of children who are looked after.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas of development

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

The review of the CYPP was undertaken with feedback from many groups and stakeholders, including meetings with 'Listen Up!' the children and young people's group, together with written responses to open consultation. Meetings held with looked after children and their written responses to a questionnaire sought their views about priorities. Views of parents of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities were also sought. The Children's Trust Board benefits from the active involvement of a young person who is also a member of the Youth Parliament.

With a view to improve behaviour and social attitudes, the emotional literacy strategy has been agreed between schools and children's services. Support materials are being used to develop social and emotional aspects of learning. All schools have active school councils and many school inspection reports mention these very positively as contributing to their school's improvement both in the primary and secondary sector.

The local authority is able to point to many areas where children and young people have played an active part, in both shaping the services provided and using them effectively. An increase in the participation of youth activities has been seen, including the Duke of Edinburgh award, ASDAN accreditation and the leadership by young people of the Youth Opportunity Fund. The Rainbow Community Centre has significantly contributed to the improved engagement of young people in its locality. Although the percentage of children and young people aged 13-19 reached by publicly funded youth services rose slightly last year, it is just below the target of 25 %.

Good services and opportunities are provided for both children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their parents through Addington Special School, Dingley Playgroup, Bridges Respite Centre and Crossroads, a respite centre for children under five. Feedback to the local authority shows these to be greatly valued. Young carers are supported by individual grants to support them in particular activities and interests.

The youth offending team has recently become independent from that of another local authority and work is underway to set up a new database and future targets as well as re-locating to suitable accommodation. There are considerable budget pressures on this service. There is evidence of appropriate early intervention and preventative work by the youth offending team in seeking to reduce the number of young people entering the criminal justice system, which is now lower than previous years. However, the proportion of looked after children given a final warning is high.

Area for development

- Reduce the proportion of looked after children receiving a final warning.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas of development

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

Young people in Wokingham generally have high aspirations and many go onto university. Fewer than nationally seek work at age 16 or 18. Few children aged 0-14 years are in families where no one is working. This is lower than similar local authorities and much lower than the national picture. Those not in education, employment or training have been reducing year on year and, although the figure fluctuates during the year, the average of 4.8% is in line with similar local authorities and lower than that found nationally, meeting the target set for Wokingham. For those aged 19, the percentage not in education, employment or training is slightly higher. There are fewer young people whose current activity is not known than in previous years and the Connexions service has a good record of the destinations of young people. School inspections reported that economic well-being was generally good or outstanding in the primary sector and most were at least good in secondary schools. The judgement is heavily influenced by pupils' attainment in the core skills of English, mathematics, science, and information and communication technology, all of which are good.

Good progress has been made in the partnership between schools. Wokingham has entered a partnership with another local authority for the development of five diplomas. A post-16 pilot for the delivery of existing courses has begun in the cluster of Wokingham town schools together with two others. Additional funding for transport costs is in place, enabling both students and teachers to move, facilitating the least disruption. A successful bid was made to the local learning and skills council

for additional funding and some finance has been provided by the secondary federation budget. Although there is not yet a common timetable across these schools, two significant blocks of common time have enabled this shared and more cost-effective delivery of courses, where the student numbers would have otherwise been low and not cost-effective in individual schools. The local authority has appropriately embarked on a combined project with the local learning and skills council, enabling the local authority to track sixth form students' progress effectively. Since 2001, all schools have been using the data from this value-added project.

A higher proportion of young people in Wokingham reach Level 2 and 3 qualifications than the national average, whilst it is in line with similar local authorities. There is a good take-up of apprenticeships and a very positive picture of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who are in work-based learning, which is above the national average. However, no care leavers are currently in apprenticeships but this is being addressed through more accessible entry to employment provision and engagement programmes. The percentage of young people in bed and breakfast accommodation and in hostels is higher than similar local authorities and the national average although it has reduced from a peak in 2003/04.

Area for development

- Reduce the number of young people aged 19 who are not in education, employment or training and reduce their reliance on bed and breakfast and hostel accommodation.

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

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas of development

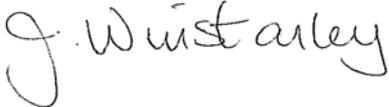
The children's services in Wokingham have good leadership providing direction and clarity across children's services with regard to its priorities. This enables robust ways of working and well-focused effort. The new staffing structures are clear and appropriate for the effective delivery of high quality services. In key areas, the local authority has taken an energetic approach to planning its response to the 2006 APA, making significant improvements, for example, in the timely management of information and data. In the last year, a culture shift has taken place towards a child- and solution-focused workforce who understand the need for clear planning, careful budgeting and performance management. However, the current level of financing children's services is putting a considerable strain on meeting its desired aspirations and future outcomes. Effective Children's Trust relationships and working practices are in place with strong and dynamic leadership from senior officers. New multi-agency, multi-disciplinary working has been tried and tested in parts of the borough and is planned to be in place across the whole of the area by January 2008. Therefore, the capacity to improve further is good.

Area for development

- Continue the drive to gain appropriate funding for key initiatives, in particular to ensure finances are on a firm footing for the future.

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