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17 December 2008

Mr Howard Cooper
Director of Children's and Services
Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council
Hamilton Building
Conway Street
Birkenhead
Wirral
CH41 4FD

Dear Mr Cooper

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council 2008

This letter summarises the findings of the 2008 annual performance assessment (APA) for your council. The evaluations and judgements in the letter draw on a range of data and information which covers the period 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008. As you know, the APA is not based on an inspection of your services and, therefore, can only provide a snapshot based on the evidence considered. As such, I am grateful to you for assuring the quality of the data provided.

Performance is judged on a four point scale as detailed in the handbook.

I should emphasise that the grades awarded are based on an overall 'best fit' model. For instance, an outstanding judgement of Grade 4 reflects that overall most aspects, but not necessarily all, of the services in the area are working very well. We know that one of the features of outstanding provision is the drive for greater improvement and no council would suggest, and nor would Ofsted, that a judgement of outstanding indicates that everything is perfect. Similarly within a judgement of inadequate overall, Grade 1, there could be some aspects of the overall service that are adequate or even good. Judgements are made in a rounded way, balancing all of the evidence and giving due consideration to outcomes, local and national contexts, priorities and decision-making.



The following table sets out the grades awarded for performance in 2008.

| Assessment judgement area | APA grade |
|---|------------------|
| Overall effectiveness of children's services | 3 |
| Being healthy | 3 |
| Staying safe | 2 |
| Enjoying and achieving | 3 |
| Making a positive contribution | 4 |
| Achieving economic well-being | 3 |
| Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people | 3 |

*Inspectors make judgements based on the following scale
4: outstanding/excellent; 3: good; 2: adequate; 1: inadequate*

Overall effectiveness of children’s services

Grade 3

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council delivers services for children and young people that are above minimum requirements overall. The council’s capacity to improve, including its management of services, is good. Overall, the council has made good progress in responding to the recommendations made by the APA in 2007. It has improved outcomes in the area of making a positive contribution and enabled children and young people to continue to play a significant role in the council’s decision-making process. Good outcomes have been maintained in the area of enjoying and achieving and educational outcomes at Key Stages 2, 3 and 4 remain above those of similar councils. Outcomes in the areas of being healthy and achieving economic well-being are also good. However, outcomes in the area of staying safe remain adequate. Although, the council reports that vacancies for social workers have declined significantly, the full impact of this has yet to be seen in the outcomes for staying safe.

Being healthy

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The council’s analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

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| <p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strong partnership working provides a range of interventions to reduce substance misuse. There has been a high degree of success in reducing the number of drug users and increasing those engaged in treatment. ▪ Arrangements to ensure annual health and dental checks take place for looked after children have improved. In 2007/08, 92% of looked after children received health and dental checks higher than the average nationally and for similar councils. ▪ The council and its partners are successful in promoting the physical and mental health needs of all children in primary schools. |
| <p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Despite a reduction of 6.5% in teenage conceptions from the 1998 baseline figure this fall is less than that achieved nationally (-13.3%) and by similar councils (-8.7%). The target reduction to be reached by 2008–2009 is -28%. |

Staying safe

Grade 2

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The council’s analysis of its strengths and areas for development in this outcome area underestimate a number of important weaknesses and overvalue the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded. Progress on reducing the number of road traffic

accidents and the number of looked after children has not been sufficient to raise performance to the level of similar councils.

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| <p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Measures in place to tackle bullying in schools appear effective. The incidence of bullying has fallen significantly since last year and is now lower than in similar councils. ▪ Arrangements for the review of care plans of looked after children are very good and improved from 90% to 95% compared to 80.4% in similar councils and 90% nationally. ▪ At 84.5%, the proportion of looked after children who are fostered and placed for adoption is higher than in similar councils at 81% and nationally at 81.7%. |
| <p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Arrangements to protect children in private fostering arrangements are inadequate. The inspection in July 2008 found there had been no overall publicity, insufficient training for staff, a lack of clarity on the approach needed and, in some cases, basic checks were not completed. The council has developed an action plan to improve the situation which is being overseen by the local safeguarding children board. ▪ Despite recent improvements, the reduction in the numbers of children killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents is falling at a significantly slower rate than nationally or in similar councils. ▪ Despite recent reductions, the number of looked after children remains higher than the national average and for similar councils. ▪ The proportion of referrals that are repeat referrals is higher than that of similar councils. |

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. This is in line with the council's self-assessment. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

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| <p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There have been steady improvements in results at Key Stages 3 and 4 and these remain above those of similar councils. Results at Key Stage 2 have also improved, particularly in English and science. ▪ The number of schools in Ofsted categories of concern has been significantly reduced. There is no school in special measures and only one school has a Notice to Improve. ▪ The proportion of permanently excluded children who are provided with 20 hours or more a week of alternative tuition has improved. |
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| <p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Key Stage 1 results in reading, writing and mathematics declined in 2007 but at a faster rate than nationally. ▪ The proportion of secondary schools that did not meet the 30% floor target has increased since 2006 and is higher than that found nationally and in similar councils. |
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Making a positive contribution

Grade 4

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is outstanding. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

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| <p>Major strengths</p> |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The council continues to develop the very good range of schemes to encourage participation by young people in decision-making and developing community initiatives. This is reflected in the achievement of beacon status nationally. ▪ Looked after children and children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are closely involved in making decisions about the range and quality of services that they receive. ▪ Child and adult mental health services for those with complex needs are a key strength and considered by the government office to be the best in the region. |
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| <p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The number of first time entrants to the youth justice system is reducing but remains higher than similar councils. |
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Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

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| <p>Major strengths</p> |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of young people achieving Level 2 qualifications by age 19 has increased from 69.3% in 2006 to 70.5% in 2007 and is higher than in similar councils. The percentage of young people achieving Level 3 qualifications by age 19 remains higher than that of similar councils, although it declined from 44.4% in 2006 to 43.5% in 2007. ▪ The 14–19 agenda is developing well. Good collaborative and multi-agency arrangements have been established between mainstream and special schools and work-based learning providers. Four category one diploma bids have been |
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secured. Information, advice and guidance have also been developed well.

- The proportion of students continuing in learning beyond Year 11 has improved and is above that found in similar councils.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds not in employment, education or training remains above the average for similar councils.
- The rate of change in increasing the number of young people completing an apprenticeship is below that of similar councils.

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

Grade 3

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is good as is its management of these services. Support and involvement by elected members remain strong and strategic leadership is good. However, the council's self-assessment is overgenerous. The council has maintained the steady improvement of educational results in Key Stages 2, 3 and 4 and developed strongly the positive contribution children and young people make. Improvements have also been made in the area of achieving economic well-being, particularly in the development of the 14–19 agenda and associated partnership work. However, despite recent improvements, the proportion of young people not in employment, education or training remains above the average for similar councils.

Action has been taken to reduce the percentage of primary schools with surplus places, although the overall figure remains high and surplus secondary school places have not yet been reduced. Arrangements to protect children in private fostering settings are inadequate and the numbers of road traffic accidents are above those of similar councils. Steps have been taken to refocus resources to improve outcomes to support more vulnerable children at home. However, overall expenditure on looked after children remains too high and expenditure on family support services remains well below that in similar councils.

Major strengths

- There is strong involvement of children and young people in the work of the council.
- There have been sustained improvements in standards in Key Stage 2 and in secondary schools.
- Strategic leadership and democratic oversight and involvement are good.
- There is an increasing focus of resources on vulnerable children.
- The 14–19 agenda, new diplomas and information, advice and guidance for children and young people have been well developed.

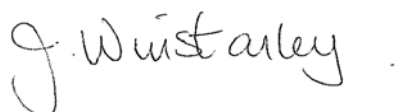
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| Important weaknesses and areas for development |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The Local Safeguarding Children Board's oversight of private fostering has not ensured the safety of children cared for in these arrangements.▪ There is a surplus of primary and secondary school places. |
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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.

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.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Local Services Inspection