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Making Social Care
Better for People



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Dear Mr Cooper

2006 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN WIRRAL METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2006 annual performance assessment (APA) process for your local authority. The judgements reflect the outcomes of the joint area review and the updated self-assessment provided by the council. We are grateful for the information provided by you to support this process and for the time made available by yourself and your colleagues to discuss relevant issues.

Summary

Areas for judgement	Grade awarded ¹
The contribution of <i>the local authority's children's services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people	3
The council's overall <i>capacity to improve</i> its services for children and young people	3
The contribution of <i>the local authority's social care services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people	2

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Grade	Service descriptors	Capacity to improve descriptors
4	A service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users	Excellent / outstanding
3	A service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for users	Good
2	A service that delivers only minimum requirements for users	Adequate
1	A service that does not deliver minimum requirements for users	Inadequate

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council consistently delivers above minimum requirements for the education of children and young people and minimum requirements for social care services. The council has responded positively to the recommendations raised in the recent joint area review (JAR). Outcomes for making a positive contribution have improved and the council's contribution to this area is now excellent; the council has been awarded Beacon status for positive youth engagement. Outcomes for being healthy and for enjoying and achieving remain good. They remain adequate for staying safe and for achieving economic well-being. The council has taken significant steps to improve integrated working in the new children's services department and there is a good commitment to improving all services further. Significant steps have been taken to improve service capacity, particularly in the sphere of social care staffing. Considerable investment has also taken place in terms of workforce training and development.

Being healthy

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this area is good. Two recommendations emerged from the JAR.

For action in the next six months

- The primary care trusts should develop and implement an action plan to improve dental health and reduce reliance on emergency services for dental care.

For action over the longer term

- Establish a database of health outcomes; use this to identify local variations in health and to evaluate the impact of health improvement initiatives.

The council and the primary care trusts have made steady progress in developing an action plan to improve the dental health of children and young people. A service level agreement has been reached. Wirral based dental practitioners are now part of the NHS dental scheme.

There is a reduction in the number of teenage pregnancies. By autumn 2006 there will be a Pathway of Care implemented to support parents in providing positive parenting. There is a very strong Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, demonstrating that partnerships with health are working effectively. From September 2006, all Wirral schools will be involved in the School Sport Partnership Programme, and this will increase significantly the number of children and young people involved in sporting activity. The council remains confident that Wirral schools will meet the national target for Healthy School Status (50%) by December this year. Start Right, a new obesity service for five to eight year olds, is currently being piloted.

School nurses are undertaking a proportion of formal health assessments on school aged looked after children. The council responded swiftly to a decrease in the percentage of looked after children receiving an assessment (from 92% to 74%) by providing additional training for school nurses to carry out health assessments. Consequently, the number of assessments is set to rise in the coming months.

Staying safe

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this area is adequate. Three recommendations for action were highlighted in the JAR.

For immediate action

- Ensure that targets and timescales are met in reducing the overall numbers of looked after children and the use of external placements.

For action in the next six months

- Partners should ensure that the implementation of the Child Concern Model is supported by clearly agreed thresholds for providing timely services to children in need.
- The area child protection committee should review its capacity to monitor, evaluate and develop child protection services and identify a representative of the voluntary and community organisations to join the committee.

The council acknowledges that previous target setting to reduce the numbers of looked after children had been overly ambitious. Realistic and achievable targets are now in place. There are currently 674 looked after children, with well thought out plans to reduce this number to 635 by the end of the year. Good progress has been made in realigning services to facilitate the reduction of children being placed in public care. There have been three appointments (with another one in progress) to lead four District Management Teams. Eleven multi-disciplinary teams will implement the Child Concern Model which has already been piloted in two wards. Seven hundred local authority staff have received training in the Child Concern/Lead Professional Model. The focus of the training is to provide timely intervention for children in need. Thresholds are being reviewed and changes will be implemented in the early autumn.

The council has reviewed the terms of reference, structure and governance of the area child protection committee. On 1 April 2006, the Wirral Local Safeguarding Children's Board was established. All sectors and stakeholders are represented. Improved information and communication technology has assisted in the development of more robust management information and led to better informed planning options. Performance management is being embedded through a variety of management training and development initiatives. Plans to improve performance in adoption and fostering are bearing early fruit. Although this year's performance was less than projected, the council has provided data which clearly show an improvement in the number of adoptions. The council reports an increased confidence by the judiciary in the council's decision making which has contributed to the timely conclusion of some adoption cases. There are good plans for further initiatives to increase the number of adopters and foster carers. An additional £1.3 million has been secured to support this activity.

There has been progress over a range of performance indicators. Numbers of referrals have been reduced although they are still higher than in similar authorities. There has been a significant improvement in the number of referrals leading to an initial assessment: 42.6% from last year's 25.3%. In addition 70.1% of initial assessments were completed within seven working days which is a reduction from the previous year's level of 79.2%. Positive progress has been made in the timeliness of core assessments. The current level of performance is adequate; however, it is still well below similar authorities and is an area requiring further improvement. Similarly, 61.5% of children had a core assessment which is an improvement but this figure is still lower than similar authorities.

Repeat referral rates have reduced from 25.3% to 13.8%; this is indicative of improved meeting of need following the first referral. Duration on the Child Protection Register is significantly higher than similar authorities and raises some concern regarding case and risk management, although last year's performance data shows an improvement. Ninety-eight per cent of reviews of children on the Child Protection Register were carried out within timescale.

Stability of placements remains an area of good performance. Good progress is noted in the number of looked after children fostered by family and friends. Ninety point one per cent of looked after children have a named qualified social worker and there has been a significant reduction in the number of unallocated cases.

Children at most risk are well protected and arrangements for children and young people on the child protection register are robust.

Enjoying and achieving

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this area is good. The JAR highlighted one action to be taken in the next six months and one for action in the longer term.

For action in the next six months

- Ensure that firm borough-wide plans are made within this academic year for removing school places.

For action in the longer term

- Increase the inclusion into mainstream schools of children and young people with learning difficulties.

The council has responded well to the issue of surplus primary places. A rolling programme has been enacted whereby each year a review of primary places will be carried out in one of the council's four geographical areas. One school will close at the end of this academic year and two others will amalgamate. A proposal to close another has been turned down by the school's adjudicator. Councillors have agreed the date for the start of the review of secondary school places.

The council has made reasonable progress on this issue. The number of children and young people in non-maintained special schools has declined. There has also been a significant decline in the overall numbers of pupils with statements of special educational needs. A proposal to hold a special school review has been discussed with councillors and work to raise the awareness of mainstream schools to prepare them for admitting more children and young people has begun. For example, a borough wide Inclusion Week is planned. Consultation on the future shape of provision for pupils who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities has started. A wide range of stakeholders are being consulted.

Making a positive contribution

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this area is excellent. The JAR highlighted one area for immediate action in the next six months and one area for action in the longer term.

For action in the next six months

- Improve transition arrangements for supporting young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities from children's services to adult services, including planning for improved education and training opportunities post-16.

For action in the longer term

- Improve opportunities for systematic consultation and strategic engagement of children and young people particularly those from more vulnerable groups including black and minority ethnic heritage groups.

Good progress has been made with improving transition planning. The council's targeted efforts have resulted in 80% of young people with a learning disability having a plan for their transition to adult services. Furthermore, the council has recently reviewed their contracting process to improve opportunities in education, employment and training for learning disability groups. This has resulted in more opportunities for young people to be employed in suitable work. It remains a targeted area for intervention and is integral to the local 14–19 strategy.

The council has been active in including vulnerable, and black and minority ethnic children and young people. Consequently, these groups are now represented in both the Youth Parliament and in planning and consulting groups. Since their inclusion, the council has established a number of multi-cultural groups, in particular an African-Caribbean Youth Voice Group. Key outcomes of consultation have been the provision of workshops about diversity and anti-bullying for young people.

The council has recently been awarded Beacon status for its inclusion work for children and young people. Children and young people's involvement in decision making is a strength. The council has adopted a charter of participation which ensures the entitlement of young people in the authority's decision-making processes. The council has appointed a senior engagement worker to coordinate youth participation. Children and young people

are actively involved in service design and delivery that is targeted at meeting young people's expectations, needs and preferences. The council's actions to prevent offending and re-offending behaviours in children and young people are having a positive impact. There has been a reduction of 32% in the number of first time entrants into the youth offending team. A positive contribution strategy for 2006/07 has been agreed and targets set. Early reports indicate a marked reduction in rates of truancy, exclusion and anti-social behaviours in relation to looked after children.

Achieving economic well-being

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this area is adequate. The JAR highlighted one action to be taken over the next six months;

- Take action to embed the 14–19 Strategy and the learner entitlement across the borough and ensure that young people receive impartial advice and information on a full range of learning opportunities that are available post-16.

The 14–19 Strategy has been reviewed and a new plan has been sent to the council's partners for consultation. An area wide 14–19 strategic partnership has been set up. Each of the borough's four learning communities has developed plans to promote greater collaboration in 14–19 provision. A 14–19 learner entitlement has been launched. This gives a commitment to providing impartial information about the full range of learning opportunities available post-16. Leaflets about learner entitlement have been distributed to 14, 15 and 16 year olds. An initial evaluation of the learner entitlement work shows that it is welcomed by its target audience, and results from this evaluation have been used to inform careers programmes. The Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership is working with all secondary schools to support the delivery of high quality information, advice and guidance about learning post-16. A minimum of 80% of Year 11 pupils in Wirral schools are accessing one-to-one interventions with Connexions personal advisers. This complements curriculum programmes including careers education. The annual activity survey for Year 11 pupils in 2005 showed that the number of in learning leavers was at its highest ever figure (90%) and the number who were not in education, employment or training was at its lowest (5.9%). It is, however, too early to fully assess the impact of these actions on the outcomes for children and young people in this area.

Progress has also been made on reducing the numbers of 16–19 year olds not in education, employment or training. This has resulted in the borough's best ever figures.

The council's management of its services for children and young people, including its capacity to improve them further

The contribution of council services to the overall management of services for children and young people is good. The JAR highlighted one action to be taken over the next six months.

- The council should ensure that staff recruitment and retention remains a priority in order to address the high levels of vacancies for qualified social workers.

Since the JAR, the council has maintained its strong focus on recruiting social workers to improve capacity for service delivery. Vacancy rates have decreased and 82% of social worker posts filled.

There has also been a marked improvement across a range of performance indicators that reflects the council's drive to establish an integrated service. The council has continued to establish multi-disciplinary teams, deliver core skills training and provide middle managers with professional development opportunities. There is an improved clarity in the council's priorities for social care. Partnership working is strengthening and children and young people have a real voice in service design and delivery. Nevertheless, challenges remain in social care, particularly in maintaining the necessary support for the high numbers of looked after children whilst realigning services and investing in early intervention. The council are confident, however, that realistic target setting and resourcing will produce a positive impact on outcomes for this performance year.

Increased family based support is being resourced by efficiency savings from reduced external placements and the additional funding found for the fostering service and family support workers. Decisions regarding children and young people entering care are now regularly scrutinised at a senior level and arrangements for the performance management of timely intervention is more robust.

Performance in education remains strong. The council has built on its strengths in education performance management in the other areas of the new children's services department, which has had a particularly positive effect on the council's capacity to improve.

Overall the council has demonstrated good progress in meeting the JAR recommendations and has shown good capacity to maintain and improve further its services for children and young people.

We confirm that the children's services grade will provide the score for the children and young people service block in the comprehensive performance assessment and will be published to the Audit Commission. The social care judgement is for CSCI information only.

Yours sincerely



FLO HADLEY

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