

26 November 2007

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

Dear Mr Cooper

## **2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN WIRRAL METROPOLITAN BOROUGH 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 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**

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council delivers above minimum requirements. Outcomes for being healthy, enjoying and achieving and making a positive contribution are good. The contribution the council makes to achieving economic well-being for children and young people has improved and is now good. Outcomes for staying safe remain adequate. The council has continued to take significant steps to improve its service capacity, particularly in the areas of social care staffing and its delivery of the 14–19 agenda. Good progress has been made in developing integrated working of core services and the council's commitment to reduce poverty and to improve services remains strong.

### **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 area is good. All schools are engaged in the national Healthy Schools Programme and 57% have already achieved the standard, which is higher than average. The council is on track to reach the stretch target set in the local area

agreement for 95% of schools to gain Healthy Schools status by December 2009. The proportion of children who are obese is higher than the regional average and is linked to the high level of deprivation in the borough. There are signs that strategies to promote healthy lifestyles are proving successful: an evaluation of the Children's Obesity Service pilot concluded it had a positive impact on children's weight, activity rate, and eating habits; the school survey in 2007 highlighted the council's effectiveness in promoting sport, recreation and exercise for children and young people outside the school; almost all schools are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted in the extent to which they enable learners to be healthy.

The impact of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy has been mixed. The strategy includes support for pregnant young women and teenage parents, and risk analysis to target resources effectively. The latest data from 2005 shows the rate of conceptions has reduced by 10% since 1998. Despite this positive picture the rate of conceptions amongst 15–17 years olds has risen for the last three years. These figures compare unfavourably against the national picture that reveals reducing numbers of conceptions for the last four years.

Hospital admissions related to substance misuse are significantly higher than the national average with many admissions related to alcohol misuse. The council and partners have identified misuse of alcohol as a key priority within the local area agreement and are introducing a new alcohol strategy in 2007-08. A specialist alcohol team for young people is already in place working alongside schools, Connexions and the youth offending service (YOS).

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service continues to provide good outcomes including timely interventions and strong support to looked after children and young people who offend. Excellent progress has been made towards a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and service development remains ahead of the national picture. The health of looked after children is monitored through a holistic health assessment. Wirral's approach to supporting the health needs of looked after children achieved recognition at a national conference in March 2007. The proportion of looked after children who received a health assessment during the year is high: performance improved from the previous year and compares very well against all councils.

### **Areas for development**

- Reduce teenage conception rates.
- Reduce levels of substance misuse.

## Staying safe

## 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 area is adequate. There are comprehensive strategies for improvement and signs of improving outcomes in some areas. A higher than average proportion of schools have been judged to be good or outstanding in ensuring that learners stay safe. The government set a target to reduce the number of children killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents by 50% by 2010 compared with the average for 1994-98. The latest validated data shows 38 children were killed or seriously injured in Wirral in 2005, the same as the 1994-98 average, while the average reduction in Great Britain was 49%. The council supports a range of road safety initiatives and there has been some success in reducing casualties among younger children.

There are effective policies to tackle bullying, and the council closely monitors progress. The multi-agency domestic violence strategy has proved very successful in increasing recognition of domestic violence, targeting high risk cases, and coordinating services. At present, support for children affected by domestic violence relies heavily on the child protection system but there are plans to develop support within a preventative framework.

The council and its partners have implemented a strategy to introduce the child concern model to refocus on early intervention to support more children in the community. During the year, services have been restructured into 11 multi-disciplinary area teams, and the common assessment framework has been introduced along with a child concern model. New guidance on thresholds has been issued and over 1100 staff attended training on the new framework. The foundations for improved performance are in place but as yet the impact is limited. The number of children on the child protection register reduced during 2006-07 but the rate remains 40% higher than in similar councils, while the rate of children registered during the year increased. The rate of children looked after decreased slightly in 2006-07 but remains 50% above the rate in similar councils. It is a key priority for the council to reduce safely the number of looked after children. The council reports that progress in 2006-07 was held back by restructuring, and early indications are that the rate is reducing in 2007-08.

In the referral and assessment system, performance on timescales for completion of assessments has significantly improved in 2006-07. However, a much higher proportion of core assessments were undertaken than the average for similar councils. The council has taken action to address this. All reviews of children on the child protection register were conducted within timescales, and all registered children have an allocated social worker. The council has been successful in recruiting foster carers during 2006-07 which has contributed to improved placement choice and a high proportion of looked after children living in family placements. The number of

looked after children allocated to a qualified social worker increased during the year but 7% were unallocated on 31 March. The rate of children adopted or made subject of a special guardianship order remains below the average for similar councils and is banded as acceptable.

Recent Ofsted inspections have judged overall standards as inadequate in two of the council's children's homes. There are gaps in the provision of residential services to children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and in some cases placements have not met children's identified needs. The council is aware of this and plans are being developed to improve services, including a new joint commissioning strategy for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

### **Areas for development**

- Further develop family support systems.
- Reduce the numbers of looked after children.
- Reduce the numbers of children killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents.
- Ensure a safe environment is available for all children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in residential settings.

## **Enjoying and achieving**

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. Children receive a good start to their education. Early years provision is good. The proportion of Foundation Stage units being judged good or better is above that of similar councils. Good progress has been made in meeting targets for opening children's centres and extended schools.

Despite a dip in results in 2006, standards at Key Stage 1 remain above those of similar authorities. Standards at Key Stage 2 rose and are above average. However, the progress made by pupils from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 is just below average. At Key Stage 3, results in mathematics and science have also risen and are in line with national figures. Standards declined slightly in English but remain above average. There is some inconsistency in trends of improvement; that of science is above the national trend but that of English is below. The overall progress made by pupils from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 has also improved and is now above average. Improvement has continued at Key Stage 4. In 2006, all secondary schools met their floor targets and value added measures for pupils from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 were above average. The proportion of pupils gaining five or more A\* to C grades at GCSE level increased to 58.64% which is in line with the national average. The percentage of learners achieving five or more A\* to C including English and

mathematics also improved as did the percentage achieving one or more A\* to G grades. These are in line with the national averages. The percentage of young people leaving care with at least one GCSE has risen and is very good. The proportion of care leavers achieving five or more A\* to C grades at GCSE rose to 18% which is well above average.

The council has provided strong support for schools causing concern and consequently the number of schools in categories of concern has declined. Nonetheless, the proportion of primary schools in special measures remains above average. Robust action has been taken to reduce surplus primary school places. Appropriate plans exist to review anticipated surplus secondary school places.

There is strong provision for pupils in special schools. All special schools inspected were judged to be outstanding or good. However, the number of pupils with a new statement of special educational need has risen. There has been a decrease in the number of pupils with new statements placed in mainstream schools.

The behaviour of pupils is good overall. Attendance at both primary and secondary schools in 2006 declined but remained broadly in line with national averages. However, the rate of authorised absence at primary schools increased and was above that of similar councils.

### **Areas for development**

- Reduce the number of primary schools in special measures.

## **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 area is good. There are many examples of support for children and young people to develop socially and emotionally, to participate in decision making and to support the community. There is positive action to engage more vulnerable young people in community activities. Good outcomes include the Looked After Children Youth Achievement Awards, engagement in accredited sexual health programmes, and care leavers commissioned to research drink and drugs issues for this group. At present there is no specific strategy to support and engage with young carers but a consultation exercise is planned. Children and young people are encouraged to take part in the planning and management of services and activities. School councils are active and helping to shape strategies, while views of the Youth Forum helped inform the Children and Young People's Plan. Young people from vulnerable groups are involved in the Youth Parliament and looked after young people have contributed to the recruitment and training of social workers and foster carers. As part of its Beacon status for positive youth engagement, the council is providing peer support to other local authorities in a project aimed at involving young people more systematically in strategic decision making.

Effective action is taken to reduce anti-social behaviour. The Youth Service in Wirral is reaching more young people than average. Positive activity programmes are provided in hotspot areas, such as youth sports nights which include substance misuse workshops. There has been a steady fall in the number of incidents of disorder being reported to the police. The YOS exceeded its target to reach young people at risk of entering the youth justice system. However, the number of first time entrants has increased significantly due to conflicting targets set for the police. There has been a significant decrease in re-offending rates, and the YOS has reduced the number of looked after children entering the youth justice system through offering restorative justice conferences as an alternative to prosecution. The YOS has not met its target for young people it supervises in suitable, full-time education, training or employment. There is a shortfall in suitable provision and better quality provision is being built up.

Participation of looked after children in reviews decreased in 2006-07 from the previous year. This is below the rate achieved by most similar councils. Improving transition arrangements for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was a recommendation in the joint area review. While the quality of transition arrangements has improved, at least 25% of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receiving social care services do not have a transition plan.

### **Areas for development**

- Improve the quality of transition arrangements for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Draw up a strategy for the inclusion of young carers.
- Increase the numbers of children looked after participating in their reviews.

## **Achieving economic well-being**

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of the council to improving outcomes for children and young people in this area is good. Schools promote pupils' economic understanding and well-being effectively. This is particularly the case in special schools. Good progress has been made in developing and embedding the 14–19 strategy which was a joint area review priority. A new strategy manager has been appointed and the team which oversees the strategy has been significantly strengthened. Good progress has been made in developing the new national diplomas and in further developing initial advice and guidance for young people over 16. Tellus2 data confirms that more young people are aware of their education and employment options than is the case nationally. Partnership working has been extended, and is increasingly promoted through the multi-disciplinary local area teams. Educational outcomes have improved. The percentages of young people achieving levels 2 and 3 by age 19 have

risen to above national figures and those found in similar areas, as has the number of young people completing apprenticeships. National Vocational Qualification success rates for work based learners have risen but remain below the national figure. The proportion of children living in households where no-one is working has improved but remains higher than that of similar councils.

Although higher than average numbers of young people continue in learning after completing Year 11, the proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training has increased and is above the level found in similar councils. The council has identified this as a priority and has revised its strategy to tackle this issue. A conference has been held to raise awareness of the issue within the council area. The rate of young people not in education, employment or training is monitored by ethnicity, gender and by area and a hotspot project has been initiated. A specific programme is targeted at 17 year olds and there is evidence of some improvement in this area. The proportion of young people participating in work based learning has remained above average.

Education, employment and training rates for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have improved and those for looked after children are very good. Strong corporate parenting, led by council members and officers, has contributed to the economic well-being of looked after children. Some opportunities have been created for young people from vulnerable groups to be employed within the council workforce.

### **Area for development**

- Reduce the percentage of young people who are not in employment, education or training.

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

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

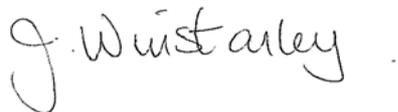
The council has good capacity to improve its services for children and young people. Its management of these services is good overall. There are clear and challenging ambitions for the area and the council and its partners share common objectives which are clearly outlined in its Children and Young People's Plan. The council takes account of the views of children and young people, including those from vulnerable groups and the outcomes of consultation have made a difference to services provided. Leadership and financial management are good and there is strong corporate support for the realignment of resources to areas of priority, such as preventative social care services and the high numbers of looked after children. A strong focus on developing the 14-19 strategy has improved outcomes in economic well-being for children and young people. While progress is generally good, some strategies for improvement in the area of staying safe have not yet had enough impact on outcomes for children and young people.

Decision making processes are transparent. There is strong commitment from councillors to the improvement of services and the scrutiny of services is robust. There is an increased level of partnership working, including with the voluntary, community and faith sector. Integrated working is increasingly being developed through the multi-disciplinary area teams. Successful recruitment and retention policies have resulted in lower vacancy rates for social workers and teachers. As a result, the council now has the people and skills it requires to deliver its services. However, the impact of staff shortages in previous years is still being felt, for example in the numbers of social workers who have gained the post-qualification award (PQ1), and the proportion of residential care workers with NVQ Level 3. The council has invested heavily in training to support the introduction of the child concern model, but overall spending on training is lower than average. Educational outcomes remain good overall.

Performance management is effective. The council has a good awareness of its strengths and weaknesses, although management information about the child concern model is underdeveloped. There are effective systems to monitor services and to ensure value for money.

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