

26 November 2007

Mr Ged Rowney
Director of Children's and Young People's Services
Stoke-on-Trent City Council
PO Box 758
Civic Centre
Glebe Street
Stoke on Trent
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Dear Mr Rowney

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN STOKE-ON-TRENT CITY 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 Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) and needs analysis 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 2

The contribution of the council's children's services in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people is adequate. Following the APA of 2006 and the previous year's joint area review (JAR) the city council was subject to Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) intervention but this did not commence until April 2007. Since then SERCO has worked with the council to deliver children's and young people's services. The council was slow to respond effectively to the issues identified within the JAR report published in February 2006, but following the 2006 APA there were a number of changes in senior personnel and a much more robust approach commenced. Inevitably, this initial delay has limited the extent of the council's progress during 2006/07. However, sufficient progress has been made in maintaining and improving outcomes for children in all aspects except that of staying safe. There has been some progress in this area but it remains inadequate.

Being healthy Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. During 2006/07, the council has improved partnership

arrangements. It has continued to develop, and implement, a range of measures aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles and good health for local children and young people. The health of expectant mothers is below average due to the high number of pregnant women smoking, perinatal deaths and babies with low birth weight. Infant mortality rates are declining but remain higher than average. Immunisation rates are better than national averages but the number of mothers breastfeeding is below average. The availability of the speech and language therapy service has improved and a parenting strategy has been implemented across the city.

Latest national quarterly information (up to March 2006) is beginning to demonstrate a recent downward trend in teenage pregnancies but, particularly in young women aged 16 and over, these remain significantly higher than national averages. Reducing teenage pregnancies remains one of the key priority areas for the council and its partners to address. Partnership approaches aimed at reducing teenage pregnancies have improved with specific services targeted at high risk groups.

There is good engagement by schools in the Healthy Schools scheme with 86% actively involved. There has been acceptable progress towards the development of a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) during 2006/07 with good joint working with the Youth Offending Service. The Youth Offending Service consistently achieved 100% of assessments within timescales while waiting times for CAMHS overall are better than national averages. There are good Tier 3 and 4 CAMHS and access to treatment for young people abusing substances. Access and services for looked after children or with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are adequate but remain as priorities for improvement. Mental health services for 16 and 17 year olds are limited. There are good, and improving, levels of health and dental assessments for looked after children.

Areas for development

- Reduce teenage pregnancies.
- Continue to develop a comprehensive CAMHS.
- Reduce the number of women who smoke during pregnancy.

Staying safe

Grade 1

Summary of strengths and areas for development

Although there have been developments over the last year the contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect remains inadequate. There has been a delay in addressing this aspect for some time. This situation was addressed during 2006/07 with a range of initiatives aimed to improve the quality of leadership and management; elected member involvement and scrutiny; partnership arrangements; and performance management processes. These changes have led to more robust approaches to children's social care and staying safe services which are beginning to demonstrate improvement in services for

children. The low baseline and delays in addressing the issues mean that many of the developments do not yet demonstrate that an adequate contribution was made during 2006/07.

The approach of schools towards tackling bullying has improved and the council has undertaken a comprehensive audit across all educational and social care settings. This has identified a range of good practice but a lack of a co-ordinated approach which is being addressed. Actions imposed at registration for childminders are significantly higher than the national average in relation to meeting the national standards on child protection. The situation improves during inspections of child care provision. The Common Assessment Framework has been well implemented following a pilot and an extensive training programme. Good performance management arrangements, including systematic monthly case file audits and reporting, were effectively implemented at the end of 2006. The JAR Action Plan has now been implemented and the council continues to make good use of the framework to monitor impact and outcomes. The Local Safeguarding Children's Board has been established but did not have all the necessary components and resources in place until recently. It was not effective during 2006/07. The approach towards serious case reviews was not robust.

Partnership arrangements, prevention strategies and measures are at an early stage of development. There was a reduction in the proportion of re-referrals to children's social care during 2006/07 but at 30%, this is too high and exceeds that of national and statistical neighbour averages. While the number of initial assessments completed within timescales improved, it remains at an unacceptable level and the lowest amongst its statistical neighbour group. Although a comparatively low number of core assessments were completed there was a significant improvement with 82% being completed within timescales. This puts Stoke-on-Trent in the top performing category for this indicator. Good prioritisation of child protection arrangements led to all children subject to a child protection plan having an allocated social worker. In addition, 100% of reviews of children with a protection plan were completed on time although less than a third of all initial case conferences, following child protection enquiries, was undertaken within set timescales. The number of children with such a plan, and re-registrations of children, have significantly increased due to the council's recent strive to ensure children are safe. The council's own performance data demonstrate shortfalls in compliance with a range of expectations; including those relating to regular visits by social workers, core group meetings and the quality of case files. All these areas show an improving trend during the first half of 2007.

There has been a significant increase in the number of looked after children. This increase, and the deliberate prioritising of children in need of protection, has led to not all looked after children being allocated to a social worker. Although an improvement on last year, an insufficient number (70%) of care plans were reviewed on time. Too high a proportion of looked after children live in residential care as compared with foster care. There are a high number of children placed outside the council area. The quality of some of the in-house residential care was poor and this has led to the planned closure of two of the units and movement of children. Recent inspections have demonstrated ongoing improvements to the fostering service.

Placement stability is poor with too many children having three or more moves during the year. Stoke-on-Trent was one of the best performers, however, in increasing the number of looked after children being adopted. There has been insufficient attention given to private fostering arrangements.

There has been a significant reduction in social work vacancies and an increasingly stable workforce. By the end of 2006, most new senior management appointments had been made. More recently, a new Director of Children's Services and Deputy Director for Children's Social Care Services have been appointed through SERCO. Elected member involvement and scrutiny of children's services improved during the year and corporate parenting approaches are now adequate.

Areas for development

- Strengthen pre-registration training for prospective childminders.
- Strengthen partnership arrangements including the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board.
- Continue to embed performance management arrangements and culture into children's social care services.
- Improve the process, and timescales, in completing and learning from serious case reviews.
- Establish effective protocols concerning the roles of all agencies and their referral criteria within the Common Assessment Framework.
- Improve the timeliness of completion of initial assessments of children in need and initial child protection conferences.
- Ensure looked after children have an allocated social worker and have their care plans reviewed within set timescales.
- Continue to develop the range of appropriate local placement options for looked after children and ensure that placement stability is improved.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate because the overall trend is one of gradual improvement.

Nevertheless, when Stoke-on-Trent's performance is compared with statistical neighbours and national averages it remains low.

Inspection evidence shows that early years settings are mostly good and ensure that children are well prepared to enjoy and achieve. These children make good progress but they still enter school at below the expected level. Schools are now making

robust judgements to address this gap based on clear data. Results for Key Stage 1 in 2006 decreased slightly in most aspects. While there was a good improvement in reading this remains below average. In Key Stage 2, results were mixed, with an improvement in English but a drop in mathematics. The local authority acted appropriately on this information, identifying reasons behind the weaknesses and providing good support to schools. The impact of this can be seen in the Intensive Support Programme, which has increased teacher's confidence and accuracy in tracking and targeting pupils' progress. This good practice is shared across all the city schools.

Standards of achievement in secondary schools are low but improving. Results at Key Stage 3 have improved overall and are in line with similar authorities. Improvement was most noticeable in mathematics although there was a slight drop in English. GCSE results at Key Stage 4 also improved, with the proportion achieving five A*-C grades, including English and mathematics, now in line with similar authorities. The number of looked after children leaving school with five GCSEs at these grades has increased and is well above the national average. However, these pupils' attainments, relative to all pupils, are not yet high enough. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress in half the schools and at least satisfactory progress in the majority of schools. The attainment gap between pupils from minority ethnic groups, and those in the city as a whole, has begun to be tackled satisfactorily, in particular that of Pakistani heritage youngsters. The Aimhigher Programme, which focuses on widening participation, has led to an improved take up of higher education by young people in Stoke-on-Trent.

Information at transition points in education has improved so that schools have a range of information to support progress between the key stages. The impact of the attendance project in schools has led to good improvements. Authorised, and unauthorised, absences continue to be higher than average in primary schools. In secondary schools, authorised absences are below the national average, but unauthorised absences are well above. The numbers of excluded pupils both fixed and permanent have declined. In particular, permanent exclusions are now below the national average. Appropriate strategies, to manage behaviour effectively, have led to improvements. However, poor behaviour is still affecting standards in a small number of secondary schools.

The local authority's interventions in schools causing concern have been very effective. Two secondary schools have been removed from special measures and one no longer requires a notice to improve. There is, however, concern that one school which went into special measures was not identified by the council as one requiring support.

The council is on course to meet its targets for extended schools in 2007 and 2008. Wide consultation has begun concerning building schools for the future. This includes listening to, and taking account of, the views of pupils.

Area(s) for development

- Improve standards in English, mathematics and science to ensure they meet national expectations.

Making a positive contribution

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. The council, together with its partners within their Trust arrangements, has a good involvement and participation strategy, which includes strong consultation processes for children and young people. There are an increased number of organisations, including voluntary agencies involved in the development and implementation of strategy. An extensive range of consultation and involvement events have led to large numbers of both primary and secondary age children being involved. In particular, they have contributed ideas towards the development of future services and strategies including positive behaviour policies. Young people were directly involved in the development of a strategy to include hard to reach children such as those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The established congress of primary school children across the city enables an increasing number of younger children to be involved. There is an elected city-wide youth forum with supporting area based networks enabling young people to give their views on issues such as the Youth Service 2007/08 Operation Plan for which 300 young people were consulted.

Children and young people, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, have been trained and supported to undertake a number of roles including peer support, mediation and mentoring. In addition, they have organised conferences and events and participated in the recruitment of staff. Young people are involved in the recruitment to relevant jobs within children's services. Good mentoring of primary school children in sports and other areas by secondary school students has led to increased confidence and participation in physical activities. Looked after children have their own conferences and consultation processes and are involved in the redesign of residential services.

There is an effective Youth Offending Service. It operates effective performance management and partnership arrangements and good preventative work. There has been a reduction in the number of first-time entrants to the youth justice system. There is an average rate of re-offending but a slight increase in numbers of looked after children who offend. There are a good proportion of young offenders in employment, education or training (EET). An increasing number of young people accessed youth services during the year but this is still below the national average. Just over 80% of looked after children and young people communicated their views to their statutory reviews which are below national and statistical neighbour averages.

Areas for development

- Reduce re-offending of young people.
- Increase the numbers of looked after children and young people able to communicate their views to statutory reviews.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The city has implemented a coherent 14-19 strategy. This has led to an effective broadening of vocational opportunities for most young people. Participation rates and completion of modern apprenticeships have increased. However, participation and achievement rates overall are well below national averages. Strong collaboration between schools, colleges and other partners has led to the development of an effective city-wide BTEC and Vocational Skills Consortium. Through the development of an e-file, young people can apply online to post-16 courses. Applications to deliver four of the new diplomas from 2008 have been successful. Provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities at post 16 is weak and there has been a reduction in the number with a transition plan. Links with employers are underdeveloped.

Connexions has been proactive in identifying barriers to economic well-being. They have gained funding to work with targeted young people on improving their social skills and emotional understanding to develop self awareness. School non-attendance is scrutinised to identify those young people who use this as a poor coping strategy when confronted with problems. This information underpins the development of nurture groups in schools and is part of an integrated partnership with the Youth Offending Service and Children's Fund. Although Connexions is not required to report to DCSF on serious housing needs, locally data is being collected to show the number of young people presented with this issue. Connexions have steered a multi-agency group in the city which has called for research into the housing needs of young people and the mapping of existing services and protocols. This research has been commissioned by the council's housing department and is currently taking place.

There is improved tracking of looked after children post-16 so that their outcomes are known. Arrangements for those leaving care are effective with a good proportion of pathway plans in place and good provision of personal advisers. As a result there are increasing numbers of care leavers in EET at age 19.

Strategic evaluation of information about those not in employment, education and training (NEET) has led to a range of appropriate intervention. This has correctly identified the different needs of specific groups of young people and NEET hot spots. It has led to an improvement in the re-engagement of young people into EET. For example, 17-year-old girls who drop out of EET because of pregnancy are now being

successfully re-engaged. However, still too many 16 year old boys and 17 year old girls are not in EET.

Area(s) for development

- Improve the provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities needs at post-16 including transition planning.
- Develop employer links for 14-19 year olds.
- Continue to reduce the number of young people who become NEET, particularly boys at 16 and girls at 17.

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

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council towards improving outcomes is adequate overall. The capacity of the council to improve children's services is also adequate. During the last year, there has been a significant improvement in management arrangements and capacity alongside improved involvement, and scrutiny, by elected members. Performance management measures have been implemented and are being well embedded across children's services. Partnership arrangements are adequate and improving. The council's strategy A journey to excellence and the CYPP are ambitious in their aims and timescales. The CYPP is of an adequate standard with good use of a needs analysis and the correct identification of six key priority areas. However, it is not supported by a sufficient level of measurable targets.

A Director, and four Deputy Directors, of Children's Services have been appointed through SERCO and the senior and middle management capacity of children's social care services has been significantly strengthened. The council has continued to maintain and develop services during a very difficult period and there is evidence of the start of improvements within children's social care and safeguarding arrangements. The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and the Local Safeguarding Children Board have now been established, and integrated, and plans for Children's Trust arrangements are well developed.

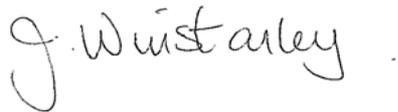
Children's services are a key priority for the council, its elected members and chief officers. The council's expenditure on services for children per capita has increased and is above statistical neighbour and national averages. The cost of providing services and accommodation for looked after children is much higher than average due, in part, to an overuse of residential provision and high numbers of looked after children. The council spends above average on family support services but below average on children in need services. It has yet to achieve good value for money on its total expenditure on children's services. There has been a significant improvement in the recruitment and retention of social workers and the vacancy rate has reduced to around the national average of 11%.

Areas for Development

- Continue the direction of travel for children's services started during 2006/07.
- Ensure the looked after children service is fit for purpose and provides value for money
- Further develop pro-active partnership arrangements and strategies to identify and address needs.

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 and will 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 small dot at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection