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Dr Deborah Absalom
Director of Children's & Young People's Services
London Borough of Bexley Council
Hillview
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Kent
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Dear Dr Absalom

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in the London Borough of Bexley 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	4
Staying safe	4
Enjoying and achieving	2
Making a positive contribution	3
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

The London Borough of Bexley continues to make a good contribution to improving the lives of children and young people in the area. It consistently delivers services that are above minimum requirements and most outcomes are judged to be good or better. The good performance noted in the last APA has been maintained and the council has made good progress in addressing the majority of areas for development. It has narrowed the gap for vulnerable children and young people, particularly those who are looked after. It makes an outstanding contribution towards supporting children and young people to be healthy. Its contribution to ensuring they are able to make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being is good. Outcomes for enjoying and achieving remain adequate because standards overall are at least in line with similar authorities. There is clear evidence of improvement in attendance, raising standards at Key Stage 2 and the quality of early years provision. However, the rates of improvement are not consistent across all key stages and there has been a significant increase in the number of schools judged to require special measures. The management of children’s services and the council’s capacity to improve remain good.

Being healthy

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.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bexley is the first council to achieve 100% participation in the National Healthy Schools Programme. ▪ There has been excellent progress made towards a comprehensive child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) compared to similar authorities. ▪ The council has been very successful in getting young people into drug treatment programmes with double the number compared to other London boroughs.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The number of teenage conceptions has risen very slightly and actions taken by the council have yet to have an impact.

Staying safe

Grade 4

Current information indicates that the council has made progress in the area of staying safe. The staying safe grade is provisional, pending the outcome of the serious case review which is currently being completed. Once this has been completed and assessed, Ofsted will confirm the provisional grade or revise if necessary.

Major strengths

- The council has been successful in increasing the number of looked after children adopted. It is one of only three authorities nationally to complete 100% of adoptions within a year.
- There has been a year-on-year improvement in the initial assessments of children who are in need, which are completed within seven days of referral. The proportion completed within this timeframe is higher than similar authorities and the national level.
- There is good early intervention and proactive multi-agency work.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The stability of long-term placements for children who have been looked after for more than two years is worse than similar authorities and national comparators.

Enjoying and achieving

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 enjoying and achieving, underestimates the significance of a number of important weaknesses.

Major strengths

- Early years provision is of good quality and there has been an improvement in the attainment of children at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Targets to improve communication, language and literacy, and personal and social development have been exceeded.
- Test results at Key Stage 2 have improved and are higher than similar authorities in English, mathematics and science. At Key Stage 2 the trend of improvement in mathematics and science is well above the national trend and that of similar authorities. It is above both comparators in English.
- Attendance has improved and is similar to national levels in both primary and secondary schools.
- The percentage of young people leaving care with at least one GCSE has improved significantly and is well above national and similar authority comparators.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- Two secondary schools and two primary schools have been judged to require special measures since the previous APA. Monitoring visits have identified that these schools are making satisfactory progress. Overall the proportion of schools in a category of concern is higher than found nationally, particularly in the secondary phase.

- Results fell in mathematics and science at the end of Key Stage 3. The trend of improvement at Key Stage 3 is below the national trend in mathematics and science.
- Whilst children continue to make the progress expected in primary schools, the overall progress made from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 has fallen and is below the national average. The proportion of secondary schools where children and young people make less progress than expected is 13% higher than nationally.

Making a positive contribution

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.

Major strengths

- The council has maintained its strong performance in encouraging participation of children and young people in decision making and supporting the community, particularly in increasing the numbers of young volunteers.
- The number of first time entrants to the youth justice system has reduced at a faster rate than nationally.
- The participation of looked after children in statutory reviews has increased and is above similar authorities and national levels.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The rates of re-offending have risen and are now above similar authorities and national comparators.
- The proportion of young offenders in education, employment and training remains below the national level. Despite a small increase since the previous APA the rate of improvement is slower than that of similar authorities.

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.

Major strengths

- More effective management and further improved partnership working have extended the 14–19 curriculum offer and improved the information, guidance and advice for young people.
- The proportion of young people who continue in education after completing Year 11 has improved and remains above similar councils and national levels. Work-based learners completing their qualifications on time has improved from below national levels to above.

- The proportion of young people leaving care who are in education, employment and training is very good and has improved since the previous APA. A greater proportion than nationally have a personal adviser.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The percentage of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities not in education, employment or training has not reduced and remains above national and similar authority comparators.
- Whilst the percentage of young people achieving Level 3 qualifications has improved it remains below the regional and national average.

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, including the management of these services, is good. Leadership is strong and there is effective and well established partnership working. This includes the voluntary and private sector. The profile of the Local Safeguarding Children Board has been successfully raised, particularly at senior management level within partner agencies. There is a wide range of mechanisms to consult children and young people and their views are taken into account effectively when services are being reviewed and developed. More robust performance management processes are being developed but are not yet fully embedded or effective. Self-assessment is generally accurate and has been used effectively to make improvements in many areas of activity. However, in a significant minority of cases the identification of weaknesses has not been followed by action which is sufficiently consistent and rigorous to secure continuous improvement. This is particularly, but not exclusively, so for a number of aspects of provision in schools, where trends compare unfavourably with those in most other local authorities.

Major strengths

- Financial management arrangements are strong and the council provides good value for money.
- There are well-established Children's Trust arrangements with effective partnership working and good multi-agency collaboration. These have been strengthened further through the establishment of early years and youth strategic partnerships.
- Strong senior leadership has developed a range of clear strategies to support the delivery of appropriate key priorities.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

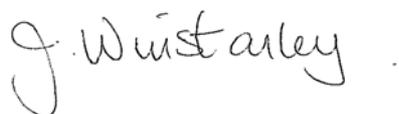
- Whilst self-assessment clearly identifies what has been improved it does not give sufficient attention to areas that require development and the steps that need to be taken to ensure consistent improvement across all services such as school improvement, teenage conceptions and re-offending.

- The impact of performance management on outcomes for children and young people is not consistent across all services, as is evident in the variation in school performance.

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".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection