



**Better  
education  
and care**

# Joint area review

London Borough of Bexley  
Children's Services Authority Area

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## Review of services for children and young people

Adult Learning Inspectorate  
Audit Commission  
Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI)  
Healthcare Commission  
HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate  
HM Inspectorate of Constabulary  
HM Inspectorate of Court Administration  
HM Inspectorate of Prisons  
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## Introduction

1. This joint area review was conducted using the arrangements required under Section 20 of the Children Act 2004. It was carried out by a multi-disciplinary team of nine inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), the Healthcare Commission (CHAI), the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the Audit Commission. The review was undertaken according to the requirements of the *Framework for the Inspection of Children's Services*.

2. The review was linked to the contemporaneous corporate assessment of the local council by the Audit Commission and its findings are represented in the relevant part of the corporate assessment report.

3. This review describes the outcomes achieved by children and young people growing up in the Bexley area and evaluates the way local services, taken together, contribute to their well-being. Joint area reviews focus on the extent to which children and young people are healthy, safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and are well prepared to secure economic well-being.

4. The review evaluates the collective contribution made to each outcome for children and young people by relevant services in the area. It also judges the contributions made by the council's services overall and, specifically, its education and children's social care services. Particular attention is given to joint action by local services on behalf of those groups of children and young people who are vulnerable to poor outcomes. Two such groups are covered in detail: children and young people who are looked after by the council; and children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

5. The review took place in two stages consisting in total of three weeks over a six-week period. The first stage reviewed all existing evidence including:

- a self-assessment undertaken by local public service providers
- a survey of children and young people
- performance data
- the findings of the contemporaneous inspection of the youth service
- planning documents
- information from the inspection of local settings, such as schools and day care provision
- evidence gathered during the earlier Youth Offending Team inspection; and
- briefings from staff within inspectorates, commissions and other public bodies in contact with local providers.

6. The second stage included inspection fieldwork. This included studies of how far local services have improved outcomes for a small sample of children and young people, some of whom have the most complex needs, and a study

of provision in the North End neighbourhood. It also included gathering evidence on eight key judgements, selected because of their critical importance to improving outcomes for children and young people in the local area. This included discussions with elected members of the local authority and their equivalents in other public agencies, officers from these agencies, service users, and community representatives. A review of case files for children and young people receiving support from a number of local agencies was also included.

## Context

7. Bexley is an outer London borough of 60 square kilometres and a population of 219,079 of which 56,000 (26%) are children and young people aged from 0 to 19. The large majority of the population is white British (91.4%) which is higher than the national figure of 87%. However, approximately 20% of 5-16 year olds in Bexley's schools are from Black and other minority ethnic (BME) families. The borough contains a mainly urban environment and some areas with parks and open spaces. Almost 80% of housing in Bexley is occupier owned, although there are significant areas of deprivation in the North and South East of the borough which affect around 6% of the population. These include North End, which was a focus for the neighbourhood study and which ranks highly in terms of national indices of multiple deprivation (top 20%) and of child poverty (top 16%). Over the next 10 years the child population is projected to rise by 28% in Erith, also in the North of the borough. Across the borough approximately 3% of the working age population are unemployed, which is low in comparison to other London boroughs. There are regeneration schemes in three areas of the borough. The authority has transferred its housing stock to two registered social landlords.

8. The percentage of primary and secondary school pupils eligible for free school meals is below the national figure at 13% and 9% respectively. In the areas of deprivation, this figure rises to between 40% and 45%.

9. Arrangements for joint working have been established for some time and include the Local Strategic Partnership, the Joint Management Board, and the Youth Strategy Group. The council's services for children and young people are managed through the Directorate of Children and Young People's Services which was established in May 2005. After a period with pathfinder status the Children and Young People's Trust was established in June 2006, building on the Children's Strategic Partnership Group which preceded it. The Children's Trust Executive Board, which provides advice on strategic and operational arrangement to the Children's Trust Board, has been in place formally since January 2005. It includes representation from a wide range of partners and is chaired by the Director of Children and Young People's Services. There is a Lead Member for children's services who chairs the Children's Trust Board. The Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) has been produced following widespread consultation.

10. Within the borough there are 548 child minders, 17 full-time day care nurseries, 52 preschool centres and 22 after school clubs. There are four children's centres and a further 17 are planned by 2010. The council maintains 59 primary schools, 15 secondary schools (of which 10 have sixth forms), one sixth form college, five special schools and two Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). There is also an Academy covering the 5-19 age range. At secondary level there is a selective system with four grammar schools and one school which has a selective stream. There is one general Further Education (FE) college.

11. There are 215 looked after children of whom 47% are cared for within the borough. There are no young offender institutions within the borough.

12. The London East Learning and Skills Council (LSC) works closely with the local authority, one college, three local training providers and 16 schools in addressing the 14-19 strategy. Post-16 education and training is provided by one FE college, 11 sixth forms, one sixth form college, one adult education college and five work-based training providers. Entry to Employment provision is managed by Bexley training group, a local provider controlling around 200 places with 60 available at any one time. Adult and community learning, including family learning, is provided by the local authority.

13. Primary health care for children in Bexley is commissioned by the Bexley Care Trust, which also provides some services. The Queen Mary's Sidcup NHS Trust is the main provider of acute health services including accident and emergency. Child and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHS) are provided by the Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust. The South London and Maudsley Trust is the main provider of specialist outpatient and inpatient services for those with more complex mental health needs. The trusts providing health services for the children of Bexley fall within the NHS London Strategic Health Authority area.

## Summary Report

### Outcomes for children and young people

14. **Outcomes for children and young people in Bexley are generally good. Children and young people appear safe.** The clear strategic vision and leadership, effective partnerships and careful targeting of resources result in generally positive outcomes. Children and young people are healthy and benefit from agencies working well together. Their dental health is good. There is very good access to a full range of CAMHS. The number of women who smoke while pregnant is decreasing and the numbers initiating breastfeeding are rising. There are effective child protection systems, which keep children safe. The proportion of children and young people on the child protection register is below the national average. The numbers of core and initial assessments carried out within timescales are above the national average, and stability of placement for looked after children is above that found nationally. Almost all looked after children are able to communicate their views at statutory reviews. Most children and young people say that they enjoy school and most

achieve in line with children and young people nationally. Although attainment in mathematics and science is below expectations at age 11, children make good progress overall at secondary school and standards at age 16 have improved faster than the national rate. Many children and young people contribute well to the life of their community and schools. They benefit from good levels of support in their social and emotional development. Young people are prepared well for working life. Success rates at 16 and 19 are either above or improving faster than the national average. A high number stay on in full-time education post-16 and the number of young people not in employment, education or training is decreasing. Vulnerable young people are supported well into suitable accommodation.

## **The impact of local services**

15. **The impact of local services in improving outcomes for children and young people is good.** The council works effectively with its partners, including voluntary and community groups, to achieve good outcomes. These are particularly evident in the partnership with health agencies, where there is a history of close working and where a range of imaginative initiatives are reaching some of the most vulnerable groups. The commitment to partnership working is demonstrated by protecting budgets and minimising disruption to front line services. Social care services are good and are strengthened by partnership working. Education services are adequate. Action to address the recommendations of the 2002 local education authority inspection has been slow, but the pace of change has accelerated in the last two years and is being driven forward by a strong Director of Children's Services and her team. The capacity of the council and its partners to improve is good. The management of limited resources is good as is value for money, which is a key priority for the council.

16. The CYPP sets out clearly the council's strategic vision and its ambitious local agenda for service improvement. Priorities are clearly described and linked closely to those of other partners, including health services and the police, demonstrating a shared commitment to the needs of children and young people. Cabinet lead members provide committed and enthusiastic support. Performance management is adequate and the capacity and arrangements for further development of this work have been increased during 2006. An information sharing protocol has been agreed across partnerships.

## **Being healthy**

17. **The impact of all local services in securing the health of children and young people is outstanding.** Partnership working is strong at both strategic and operational levels, with sound joint planning linked to the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services. There are effective joint commissioning arrangements for CAMHS. A highly effective range of multi-agency support services is available and accessible to parents and carers, particularly for those with young children, through an increasing

number of children's centres. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities benefit from excellent multi-agency team support.

18. Health outcomes meet most national targets, including increasing breastfeeding rates, which has benefited from increased resources. Support for vulnerable groups is targeted well, with an excellent multi-agency health team promoting good health outcomes for looked after children. There is a strong ethos across agencies to promote healthy lifestyles and, in schools, the National Healthy Schools programme is exceeding the targets set. A very good multi-agency sexual health partnership has resulted in a reduction in teenage pregnancy rates. The implementation of new joint strategies has been informed by detailed research and the broader issues identified are being addressed.

19. The CAMHS strategy has assisted the development of a service where children and young people, including those with learning disabilities, receive good support which meets access targets. An emphasis on prevention and early intervention is demonstrably reducing rates of referral on to more specialist mental health services.

### **Staying safe**

#### **20. The impact of all local services in keeping children and young people safe is good.**

21. Children and young people who are most at risk are protected well through good inter-agency collaboration and well managed procedures. Stability in the workforce is improving as a result of effective measures to recruit and retain qualified social workers. Systems to ensure safeguarding in the recruitment of social care staff are robust, and recruitment practice in commissioned services is appropriately monitored. Assessments of need are carried out promptly and there is a good multi-agency approach in the response to cases of domestic violence. However, there is also some inconsistency in the quality of social work practice; for example the quality of reports to child protection conferences and to reviews of looked after children is variable and they sometimes lack sufficient analysis. Supervision and family support are maintained when children and young people are taken off the child protection register, and this contributes to the reduction in the number of those who need to be re-registered within 12 months.

22. Professionals in key agencies work well together and share information. There are appropriate interventions for children in need, but the implementation of the strategic plan for family support is at an early stage. The early intervention pilot Multi-Agency Integrated Services Initiative (MAISI) has contributed to improving partnership working for children, and to a clearer understanding of thresholds for referral. Corporate parenting is effective and looked after children receive good supervision and support. Careful attention is given to providing stability of placements for looked after children so that they develop and sustain strong attachments, and care leavers are able to maintain

contact with former foster carers. However, there is limited placement choice which impacts in particular on BME children.

### **Enjoying and achieving**

**23. The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and recreation and to achieve well is adequate.** In the last two years the council has introduced a number of strategies and initiatives to challenge perceptions and raise achievement for all children and young people. However, some of these developments are at an early stage of implementation and have yet to impact across the borough. The improved partnership with schools, higher quality data and a more rigorous strategy to monitor, challenge and intervene in underperforming schools, together with targeted projects to raise attainment and improve behaviour and attendance are, however, beginning to make a difference. More robust systems to monitor and support children missing education have recently been established. Work on a broader curriculum and increased flexibility has contributed to significant recent improvements in outcomes at Key Stage 4. Early years education and childcare provision have improved and are satisfactory. Parents and carers receive good support and information to help their children achieve well. The overall range of leisure and recreation activities for children is adequate, with some good and very good features. Educational support for looked after children is good, with effective monitoring of progress and examples of good and focused support which responds to need. Provision for children and young people of school age with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is currently satisfactory, with significant additional resources (£2.5m) having been delegated to schools, and with plans in place to delegate greater resources to schools and provide more specialist provision within the borough.

### **Making a positive contribution**

**24. The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good.** Children and young people have access to a wide range of services that successfully support their social and emotional development. Good partnership working, including strong links with the major local voluntary organisations, ensures that support is holistic and well targeted. The Children's Information Service provides valued and easily accessible information, support and guidance. Many varied opportunities exist for involvement in mentoring and volunteering projects. Children and young people, including looked after children and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive good support during times of change and transition.

**25.** The recent implementation of the Consultation and Participation Strategy, the role of a dedicated children's participation officer and the newly developed participation toolkit, demonstrate the council's strong commitment to ensuring that children and young people are actively involved and participate in decision making. However, the council and its partners recognise that the strategy is not yet fully embedded. Children and young people have participated in some major

consultation events. The youth council and children's parliament continue to develop well; however, school councils are an underdeveloped resource at present.

26. Partnership working between agencies to prevent anti-social behaviour among children and young people is strong and there are many preventative and diversionary schemes across the borough, for example the Ball Court Street Football League. Good initiatives to break down community barriers and ensure children and young people explore equality issues are in place. Despite this, many children and young people report that territorial and race gangs continue to be a source of concern. There is clear guidance for schools and educational settings regarding the reporting of racist incidents. However, the council believes that schools continue to under report.

### **Achieving economic well-being**

27. **The impact of all local services in helping children and young people achieve economic well-being is good.** Young people are well supported in preparing for working life. There is good access to childcare provision and good information and support from a range of agencies to help parents and young people to take up opportunities in education, employment and training. Good, targeted joint working has greatly reduced the number of children and young people who are not in employment, education or training and those whose current activity is unknown. The proportion of young people staying on in full-time education at 16 has increased to above the national average although the drop-out rate at 17 is too high. Success rates at A-level are above the national average and are close to statistical neighbours but achievement at Level 2 is lower than the national average, although improving at a faster rate. Collaborative working between the council, schools and colleges has significantly improved the 14-19 curriculum offer. However, there is still insufficient provision at entry level and Level 1, for vocational options and for those with complex or severe learning difficulties.

28. Nearly all young people have access to decent and affordable housing. The housing department, working with key agencies, has developed successful strategies to ensure that vulnerable young people live in suitable accommodation. Economic and community regeneration is targeted appropriately at the most deprived areas.

### **Service management**

29. **The management of services for children and young people is good.** The council's ambition is good. Bexley has a clear strategic vision and a challenging local agenda for service improvement, developed through a needs assessment which clearly focuses on children and young people with diverse and special needs. Prioritisation is good. There is cross-party political support for children and young people's services. A strong focus on a number of priority areas has resulted in improvements across education, children's social care and health, supported by targeted investment, including funding from the

Neighbourhood Investment Programme. The capacity of the council and its partners to deliver better outcomes for children and young people is good. There has been a sound management approach to the change process based on visible leadership, shared values and a strong emphasis on minimising disruption to front line services. There are generally good inter-agency relationships at strategic and operational levels, and the council is fulfilling its community leadership role, particularly through the Neighbourhood Investment Programme. The capacity of the council and its partners to improve is good.

30. Value for money is good. The council makes effective use of its resources and gives considerable priority to achieving value for money. Although resources remain limited, budgets and targets are generally well controlled. Performance management is adequate. During 2006, the Directorate has commissioned and implemented recommendations arising from an external review to bring together knowledge management and performance management functions into one service. This service is working towards the integration of performance systems and reporting. Although managers are generally aware of how their services are performing, many action plans which support strategies and policies do not include clear measurable targets and outcome indicators. Performance management systems across new partnership arrangements are at an early stage of development. The council's self-assessment is reasonably accurate in identifying strengths and areas for improvement, although the timescales for the change programme are ambitious.

## Grades

Grades awarded:

4: outstanding; 3: good; 2: adequate; 1: inadequate

	Local services overall	Council services	Health services
Being healthy	4		
Staying safe	3		
Enjoying and achieving	2		
Making a positive contribution	3		
Achieving economic well-being	3		
Service management	3		
Capacity to improve	3	3	
Children's services		3	
The education service		2	
The social care services for children		3	
The health service for children			3

## Recommendations

### For action over the next six months

#### The council should:

- ensure that all action plans have objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-limited to achieve more robust monitoring of outcomes and impact
- with its partners, evaluate the impact of projects to combat racism and ensure that schools and educational settings improve the reporting of racist incidents
- continue to improve the level and quality of active involvement of children and young people in decision making and ensure that all services, partners and service users understand, implement and evaluate the new Consultation and Participation Strategy
- continue to work with schools to raise standards at Key Stage 2, particularly in mathematics and science
- work with schools to implement the agreed strategies to improve attendance and behaviour, reduce exclusions and monitor the progress of children missing and at risk of missing education
- ensure consistency in the quality of social work practice by improving the quality of report writing for child protection conferences and reviews of looked after children.

### For action in the longer term

#### The council should:

- improve educational opportunities for those with severe and complex learning difficulties
- develop school councils and encourage more young people to vote in relevant elections
- with its partners, increase the range of post-16 learning opportunities at entry level and Level 1
- with its partners, reduce the number of 17 year olds who drop out of full-time education.

# Main Report

## Outcomes for children and young people

31. **Outcomes for children and young people in Bexley are generally good.**

32. **Children and young people are generally healthy.** In a survey for this review, almost all children and young people report that they are very or quite healthy, that they find life very or quite enjoyable and that they find it very or quite easy to get help, advice and information when they need it. The number of women who smoke during pregnancy is decreasing. The number of mothers initiating breastfeeding is rising steadily and is higher than the national average. Bexley children have below average numbers of decayed, filled or missing teeth. Conception rates in 15 to 17 year olds have fluctuated since 1999 but there was a reduction in the rates in 2004. There is very good access to a full range of CAMHS services as well as engagement by young people in appropriate drug and alcohol services. An emphasis on prevention and early intervention is demonstrably reducing the number of children and young people referred to more specialist mental health services. Mental health assessments for young people who offend are of a high standard. High numbers of looked after children receive dental and other health checks and assessments on time. Therapy services have been redesigned and this has reduced the waiting lists for most children.

33. **Children and young people appear safe and outcomes for vulnerable children and young people are largely good.** Fewer children on the child protection register are re-registered, and this figure is significantly better than that found nationally. The proportion of children and young people on the child protection register is below the national average and the length of time they remain on it has decreased; currently no children have been on the register for over two years. All child protection cases are allocated to a qualified social worker. The numbers of core and initial assessments carried out within agreed timescales are above the national average. The number of children involved in road traffic accidents is reducing, and compares favourably to Outer London figures. Young people under 18 who are admitted to hospital due to injuries is significantly below average. The stability of placements for looked after children is above the national average and their statutory reviews are undertaken within required timescales. The percentage of care leavers in employment, education or training has risen to the national average.

34. **Children and young people achieve adequately.** Most children and young people say that they enjoy school and feel that they achieve well. Outcomes at the end of the Foundation Stage and at ages 7, 11 and 14 are similar to those nationally. Standards and progress in mathematics and science by children at the age 11 are below expectations. By age 14, their achievement is similar to that nationally and between the ages of 11 and 14, they make expected progress overall and slightly better than expected progress in

mathematics. Their achievement and standards at Key Stage 4 are improving at a faster rate than those nationally, and are now generally good, with all secondary schools meeting at least minimum standards and very few students leaving school without any qualifications. Pupils from minority ethnic groups achieve well and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make satisfactory and sometimes good progress in mainstream education. Achievement by care leavers varies from year to year; it dropped in 2006 but compared favourably with similar local authorities in the two previous years. Rates of attendance are similar to those in similar authorities and nationally but the levels of authorised absences are high. Rates of exclusions have reduced and are now in line with national comparators.

**35. Children and young people have a good range of opportunities to make decisions and take personal responsibility and many make a good contribution to their communities.** These opportunities help them develop socially and emotionally, increasing their self-esteem and self-confidence. Many children and young people benefit positively from participating in a wide range of volunteering projects and there are good opportunities both to become mentors and receive mentoring support. Children and young people are regularly consulted on their views but do not consistently receive feedback on the action taken in response to their contributions. The number of young people involved in UK Youth Parliament elections is low. Young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are encouraged to participate in the planning of changes to their lives. Almost all looked after children contribute to their statutory reviews and there is good support for young people when they leave care. The number of young people entering the youth justice system for the first time in the year 2005/06 was 193, lower than the council's target of 216. However, in the first quarter of the current year 2006/07 there have been 99 new entrants. There has been a reduction in the number of final warnings and convictions for looked after children. During 2005/06 re-offending levels were graded at Level 3 which was better than both the national and London levels.

**36. Children and young people are able to achieve economic well-being and are prepared well for working life.** The levels of take up of the education maintenance allowance are high. Attainment levels at GCE/VCE are increasing faster and are higher than the national average. However, outcomes at Level 2 and Level 3 by the age of 19 are lower than the national average, although improving at a faster rate. Overall, the outcomes in work-based learning are average but improving. The number of young people benefiting from staying on in full-time education at 16 has increased to above the national average. Nearly all young people are housed in decent homes. The proportion of care leavers at 19 in suitable accommodation has risen significantly and is now well above the national average. The number of young people who are homeless is low and reducing, as is the length of stay for families and young people in temporary accommodation. The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training is reducing and is lower than the national average. The proportion of those whose destination is not known has greatly

reduced and is significantly below average. However the drop out rate at 17 is too high and most teenage parents are not in education, employment or training. A high proportion of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities participate in employment, education and training. However, many have to travel outside the borough to access appropriate provision.

## The impact of local services

### Being healthy

37. **The combined work of local services in securing the health of children and young people is outstanding.** Multi-agency working is very well established and enables particularly good support to vulnerable groups of children and young people.

38. Most children have a good start in life. Maternity services are led increasingly by midwives, and women have good access to local care in a wide range of settings across the borough. For example, a Sure Start midwife provides individual care and support through outreach to vulnerable young mothers. Women with specific needs, such as those who abuse substances, are identified early in pregnancy and supported well through good multi-agency care packages. Good initiatives, including the appointment of a smoking cessation midwife, are effective in reducing the proportion of expectant mothers who smoke. The numbers of mothers who initiate breastfeeding is rising, supported by a comprehensive multi-agency policy that identifies cultural attitudes towards breastfeeding and provides a consistent approach to supporting women. A helpful clinic for substance-misusing pregnant women is based in Queen Mary's Sidcup.

39. Parents and carers, particularly those attending Sure Start, voluntary groups and an increasing number of children's centres, receive good advice and support in keeping their children healthy. A very effective dental health promotion service includes targeted work in children's centres with an imaginative and innovative approach to helping young patients feel at ease. Teenage parents receive access to a wide range of support and advice both during and after their pregnancies through Choices, a partnership project involving a range of professionals. An excellent Community Mothers scheme uses volunteers to work at home with parents in supporting their parenting. Health visitors and social care staff are targeting work successfully with minority groups such as the Sisters group for Black women. There is strong support for particularly hard to reach groups, and access to primary care is facilitated by three GP practices offering an enhanced service to refugee and asylum seeking families, a link health visitor for a traveller site and ready access to interpreting and translating services across all health agencies.

40. Agencies in Bexley make valuable contributions to promoting healthy lifestyles. An active Healthy Schools partnership drives a range of good initiatives to support the National Healthy Schools programme and almost all schools are accredited. Activities include 100% of primary schools taking part

in the school fruit and vegetable scheme, the adoption of whole school food policies, drug and alcohol education and a comprehensive programme to increase the uptake and quality of physical activities and sport in schools. For example, Active Play is a popular initiative with primary schools, promoting activity sessions during break and lunch periods. Increasing numbers of children and young people with additional needs are benefiting from a good range of inclusive leisure and sports activities both in and out of school. The Care Trust, with the council, is beginning to implement a strategy to tackle obesity.

41. Health matters are taken seriously by the youth service and include staff being trained to use a drug screening tool with vulnerable young people, and involvement in initiatives to improve sexual health. This is in addition to providing the more traditional opportunities for physical activity. The Youth Offending Team benefits from having a full-time substance misuse CAMHS worker, although the wider promotion of healthy lifestyles is underdeveloped in the service.

42. A very good sexual health partnership delivers an effective teenage pregnancy strategy resulting in some lowering of teenage pregnancy rates. The implementation of new strategies is informed by consultation and audit and the broader issues identified are being addressed. These include work with CAMHS, the youth service and drug and alcohol services. Young people's sexual health clinics, held on different days in a variety of locations at accessible times, provide good advice and support on a range of issues. In one innovative partnership a clinic, in partnership with a housing association, targets an identified 'hot spot' for teenage pregnancies. Other good initiatives include a C-card scheme to provide young people with free condoms, and the morning after pill is available free of charge to young women in 24 local chemists. School health advisors hold drop in sessions in 15 secondary schools providing highly accessible support to young people on a range of issues. Foster carers and social workers are being trained using 'Speak Easy', a national programme to enable young people to talk more comfortably about sex and relationships. The health needs of looked after children are met well, particularly through good access to CAMHS and through well targeted support for sexual health. Foster carers are actively engaged in promoting and ensuring the good health of their foster children.

43. Bexley children and young people attending Queen Mary's Hospital receive good care from appropriately trained staff. An excellent multi-agency and community nursing team, working closely with social care services, facilitates safe transitions of care between hospital and home, including support in school for children with complex needs. Creative work to redesign therapy services has in some instances reduced waiting times. For example, the occupational therapy service trains education staff to use 'Jump Ahead' a whole class activity programme that supports children with coordination difficulties. Sixty schools have been trained and referrals to the service have reduced.

44. Children and young people, including those with learning disabilities, receive good and timely support from CAMHS. There is excellent guidance explaining access and eligibility for services. An adolescent outreach project is working to further develop services for those aged 16 to 17 who are particularly vulnerable to developing mental health difficulties and who find it difficult to access services. Young people have been extensively involved in the needs analysis, consultation and service development stages of the project. Primary mental health workers are increasingly delivering effective early intervention services in a variety of community and school-based settings. The highly positive outcomes include increased attendance rates, minimal waiting and an increase in the provision of structured supervision and training for a range of professionals.

### **Staying safe**

45. **The work of all local services in keeping children and young people safe is good.** Children and young people most at risk from abuse are protected well by good professional practice and inter-agency collaboration. Child protection procedures are implemented and practice is managed and audited effectively. Information is recorded well by social workers on case files. However, the quality of report writing for child protection conferences is inconsistent and some reports, for example reviews of looked after children, lack robust analysis. All cases of children on the child protection register are allocated to qualified social workers. The number of children on the register is below the national average, and cases are well managed to ensure children and young people do not remain on the register unnecessarily. Family support continues after children and young people have been taken off the register, and the numbers of re-registrations are significantly better than that found nationally. Participation by parents and carers in child protection conferences and in core groups contributing to decision making for child protection cases is good. There is also good attendance by children and young people at child protection conferences.

46. The newly established Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) is supported well by all councillors, has clear objectives and is funded well. It is addressing some key priorities such as safer recruitment and more effective links with the independent and voluntary sectors. A wide range of information is available to parents, carers and children about risks in the home and in the community. There is a good local authority anti-bullying strategy for schools. There is a good strategy to address domestic violence and an effective programme of support from the police to help reduce this.

47. The good performance monitoring and audit work in child protection has led directly to improvements in training and practice; for example Queen Mary's Hospital now has a multi-agency child protection team. All agencies have policies on safer recruitment and carry out the required checks on staff before appointment. To ensure compliance with safer recruitment procedures an audit is being carried out in 10 schools. Multi-agency public protection arrangements

to monitor serious offenders in the community are in place, and are working well. Further work is underway on risk assessment and on the criteria for cases which are presented to the public protection panel. There is a good system in place in social care services to track missing children.

48. Procedures in social care for referring and assessing children and young people are effective, with good management oversight, and there is a prompt response to those assessed as being in more urgent need. There has been a significant improvement in the proportion of assessments carried out within the required timescales and this is now above the national average. There is effective audit and training in place which is improving key aspects of practice such as analysis of need. However, the quality of recording assessments is variable and some lack clear analysis.

49. The piloting of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) has contributed to a more consistent approach to intervention and support for children and young people in need of protection. This, together with the development of the MAISI pilot, has contributed to an improved understanding of thresholds by key agencies, and a reduction in re-referral rates to social care services. There have been particularly good improvements in partnership working for children and young people not subject to statutory procedures. A range of good quality resources are available to avoid the need for children to be looked after and these are used well. There are plans to further develop preventative services through a multi-disciplinary team, using lessons learned from the CAF, with closer links to wider family support services.

50. There is an effective strategy for the recruitment and retention of social care staff, for example by the recruitment of social workers from abroad. Financial investment in training social care staff to be qualified social workers has led to workforce stability. All cases are allocated, including looked after children and children in need. Social workers receive regular supervision and training to ensure sustained improvements in outcomes for the most vulnerable children.

51. The safeguarding of looked after children is promoted effectively. Most children and young people are placed with foster carers. These foster carers are well trained and appropriately supported. Changes of placements are managed effectively and minimised as far as possible to ensure that most looked after children are in stable placements. However, limited choices do not always enable a good match or adequate preparation and matching for emergency placements. The local authority is actively seeking to recruit a more diverse group of foster carers, particularly from BME communities. Although there are a large number of looked after children placed outside the borough, many of these are placed with Bexley Council foster carers. They, therefore, continue to receive the benefit of local support services. A corporate parenting forum is in place which monitors complex cases, listens to the views of children and young people, and acts on those views as appropriate. Some councillors with specific responsibility for looked after children are new to this role. Councillors are

working hard to ensure the best possible outcomes for this group of children and young people.

52. Families of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are provided with a good range of support. This includes Falconwood residential establishment, which is purpose built and offers good respite provision for children and young people. Effective use is made of the direct payment scheme, and there is no waiting list for direct payment assessments. The complex case panel contributes to effective multi-agency planning for children and young people with complex needs, which includes transition planning to adult services.

### **Enjoying and achieving**

53. **The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and recreation and to achieve well is adequate.** In the last two years the council has introduced a number of strategies and initiatives to challenge perceptions and raise achievement for all children and young people. However, some of these developments are at an early stage of implementation and have yet to impact across the borough.

54. Parents and carers receive good support to help their children, including those who are disabled, achieve well. A good range of information leaflets is available to parents and carers and includes a very useful guide to starting school and clear information to support families' choice of childcare. The activity of voluntary groups is collated and disseminated through the Bexley Council for Voluntary Youth Organisations, and libraries provide a good range of educational activities for parents and children.

55. The coordination of childcare and learning provision for children under five has improved, reflecting better strategic planning and sharper monitoring procedures. The borough does not yet meet demands for full day care for children over two years old and duplication of provision has led to unfilled places in some areas. Most early years settings, and in particular childminders, support young children's learning well. The Bexley childminders' network has a high profile in supporting its members. Childcare provision is satisfactory with good access in some parts of the borough, though provision in the north is less even. Access to early years education is good; all three and four year olds whose parents wish can attend pre-school or nursery school. The four children's centres are beginning to develop models of provision to support local needs. However, there is currently no structured evaluation of the quality or impact of these developments to inform the planned expansion of the children's centre programme.

56. The number of schools in an Ofsted category of concern has increased since September 2005 and is significantly higher than the percentage found nationally, although no schools are in special measures. An effective monitoring policy ensures that schools causing concern are identified promptly, offered support or intervention and that their progress is tracked. However, the quality

of monitoring notes of visit is uneven. Relationships between schools and the local authority have improved very significantly in the last two years as a result of better communication and greater transparency in decision making. This new climate of trust and confidence has enabled the local authority to challenge more rigorously the performance of its schools. Monitoring, challenge and support procedures are now clearly defined, leading to better focused intervention and support. Detailed performance data are used increasingly well by the school improvement service and schools to identify underperformance and set challenging targets, including for children and young people with special educational needs.

57. Schools are also working in improved partnership with each other to share practice, in some cases brokered by the local authority. A number of successful targeted initiatives are beginning to demonstrate impact. These include the schools in the Bexley Excellence cluster where standards of achievement and attendance have increased, behaviour has improved and exclusions have reduced. Primary headteachers in eight schools have also piloted the 'creative learning journey' and report increased pupil motivation and more effective teaching and learning. The Intensifying Support Programme has also proved effective in supporting improvement in underachieving primary schools. The significant recent improvements in outcomes at Key Stage 4 are attributed to broadened curriculum provision, increased flexibility and an emphasis on vocational courses in non-selective schools.

58. The local authority and schools acknowledge that rates of attendance are too low and that exclusions are too high. A multi-agency strategy group has been established with the specific remit to focus on increasing attendance and reducing exclusions, and a borough-wide attendance strategy is due for completion by December 2006.

59. Arrangements to monitor and support children and young people missing from education or at risk of missing education were previously unsatisfactory and acknowledged as such by the local authority which has recently established more robust monitoring systems. The primary and secondary PRUs provide a good resource, valued by schools. Places in alternative education for 14 -19 year olds are still insufficient. Provision for the different groups educated outside school continues to be managed by separate teams, though the recent move to create small group provision for children with medical conditions has been successful. The increase in the number of children and young people receiving education at home has placed pressure on resources to monitor this group.

60. The range of leisure and recreation activities for children and young people is adequate overall with some good and very good features. Young people report that in some areas there is plenty for them to do, though in other areas facilities are less good. There is a good range of sports facilities, supported by a redevelopment project for leisure centres and the parks development initiative, though it is reported that the effects of vandalism have

restricted use of some facilities, for example in the skate and play parks in Slade Green. Arts provision is supported through the Bexley Academy for Performing Arts and the Bexley Centre for Music and Dance. There is a wide programme of summer holiday activities and a new play strategy attracted over 5,000 parents and children to its launch event. Over 90% of looked after children and young people participate in out of hours activities. Provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities provided by SNAP (a voluntary agency providing support for disabled children and their families) is good, and includes play schemes and a new youth club for special school pupils. In 2006, 90 children and young people with a disability represented Bexley at the youth games.

61. Support for the education of children and young people who are looked after is good; specialist support is provided by an education liaison officer working in a multi-disciplinary team with a second post vacant at the time of the inspection. Comprehensive guidance is provided for the designated teacher in each school and contact is maintained through regular bulletins, and termly visits to secondary schools. The specialist officer monitors the educational progress of looked after children and young people, their personal educational plans and their participation in out of hours provision through a central database. Support for their learning is provided through Key Stage 3 sessions, coursework support at Key Stage 4 and homework clubs.

62. Provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is satisfactory. Currently high numbers of statements, including for those with relatively low levels of need, absorb valuable resources. There are also insufficient specialist places within the borough for children with autistic spectrum disorders, those with hearing impairments and those with emotional and behavioural difficulties. There is a fundamental review of special needs education in progress which is designed to secure more specialist provision to meet these needs within the local authority. Significantly increased funding (£2.5m) has been delegated to schools to support early intervention. However, much development and training still needs to be provided to support implementation.

### **Making a positive contribution**

63. **The work of all local services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good.** Universal provision to support children and young people's emotional and social development is good. Children's centres are having a positive impact on support services for families. The Children's Information Service provides easily accessible information, advice and guidance both through its website and through displays in libraries, children's centres and other venues. An enthusiastic coordinator ensures schools and youth centres now have good access to a wide and interesting range of citizenship projects that encourage children and young people to examine issues such as community safety, bullying and racism. However, opportunities to explore children's rights and democratic processes are more

limited. Children and young people from vulnerable groups have access to good support through a diverse range of services designed to meet individual groups' needs, such as the Youth Engagement Service (YES), the support to young carers from Bexley Moorings and from SNAP. Creative use is made of young people's knowledge and experience through mentoring schemes, such as motorbike workshops and mentoring for care leavers. A wide range of volunteering schemes exist; alongside the Duke of Edinburgh and Millennium Volunteers schemes are opportunities such as Step into Sport and befriending projects for children with disabilities that enable them to go on residential trips.

64. Transitional support at times of change for children and young people is good throughout their education; there is clear, useful information available for parents regarding entry to pre-school and school. Strong support packages are available to pupils at risk of exclusion and those reintegrating into mainstream school from the PRU. Children coping with trauma have timely access to mental health services.

65. During the inspection, many children and young people raised the issue of local territorial and racist gangs as a source of concern. This is a concern shared by many residents. The Anti Racist Project Group, created 18 months ago, has commissioned an innovative theatre production that reflects local secondary school pupils' experiences and attitudes to racism. This is one of many initiatives involving the council, schools and the police to address concerns and break down barriers within schools and the community. Diversity is celebrated through events such as Black History Month and the Unite festival, an event organised by the Children's Parliament. The 'Combating Racism' document for schools and educational settings provides clear guidance on the reporting of racist incidents. However, the council believes that schools continue to under report.

66. The council has made good progress with the implementation of the Consultation and Participation Strategy. Regular consultation takes place with children and young people, especially through representative groups such as the Children's Parliament and Youth Council. Views expressed by children and young people at major consultation events are now incorporated into the CYPP. The principles of involving children and young people are developing across the council and in the work of its partners, such as the health services; for example, CAMHS are engaging young people in the development of the adolescent outreach project. However, participation is not yet fully embedded and children and young people sometimes feel disengaged from the process of consultation. Despite this, good examples of where children and young people have contributed fully and made a difference are evident, for example, in the development of Howbury Youth Centre and in the development of new play parks in the borough. The youth service is helping young people to understand, develop and influence some issues that affect their lives, for example, young people on the Youth Council have responsibility for the allocation of Youth Opportunity Funding to projects across the borough.

67. Most children and young people have the opportunity to contribute to the life of schools. Some school councils encourage children and young people to participate fully, for example, in interviews for headteachers and in the monitoring of teaching and learning within classrooms. No formal links currently exist between school councils or between school councils and the Children's Parliament and Youth Council. The council correctly recognises that school councils are an underdeveloped resource in terms of involving children and young people, and training has been identified for key staff in this area. The number of young people that vote in the UKYP elections is low.

68. Opportunities for looked after children and young people to have a voice are generally good. Almost all contribute to their reviews and there are good materials in place to assist them. Opportunities for children to contribute to decision making at their child protection conferences are more limited. Looked after children and young people are represented on the corporate parenting forum and their involvement has led to some changes in the delivery of services. They have access to a newly appointed complaints officer and an independent advocacy service. The Children's Rights Officer produces an informative magazine for looked after children and young people. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities contribute to annual reviews and transition plans. Person centred planning is currently being piloted within special schools and SNAP is enabling young people to compile a bid to fund a requested residential trip.

69. The Community Safety Partnership effectively engages all partners in a wide ranging approach to reducing anti-social behaviour among children and young people. Good preventative and diversionary schemes, such as the Ball Court Street Football League, engage some hard to reach young people. Well considered use of early intervention processes ensures that the number of young people with Anti-Social Behaviour Orders is lower than that of statistical neighbours. The Safer Schools initiative in six secondary schools is proving effective, and children and young people welcome the increased presence of police and community safety officers. Community Safety Action Zones are having a positive impact overall in those wards where they are currently in place. Children and young people at risk of offending receive good support from YES, and the Youth Inclusion and Support Panel develop intensive targeted support packages for the most persistent young offenders. There has been a substantial increase in the number of young offenders in education, employment and training, enabling them to make a positive contribution.

### **Achieving economic well-being**

70. **The work of all local services in helping children and young people achieve economic well-being is good.** Good action is being taken by partners to support families in maximising their economic well-being. There is a wide range of childcare provision which is well promoted. For example, day care at Bexley College has been improved significantly to ensure that young parents are not disadvantaged, and at registration the quality of day care is

better than the national average. Benefits and credit entitlements are promoted well and the take up of the education maintenance allowance is good. Schools, the college and key training providers have effective systems and a good and wide range of support to ensure that cost is not a barrier to children and young people's full participation in appropriate activities. This support includes library membership, free active reading events and internet use, and free or concessionary rates for leisure centres and outdoor sports facilities.

71. Young people are well supported in preparing for working life. Young people are well supported in developing self-confidence, team working skills and enterprise through a range of innovative and quality controlled programmes which are well planned and coordinated. For example, good joint working with the local football club offers effective preparation for work courses. Partners go out of their way to accommodate all young people in this complementary curriculum. Careful records are kept and monitored. There are 1,700 young people on the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme programme including good representation from both children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and from BME groups. Improved opportunities for vocational studies are available for Key Stage 4 pupils who all have access to good work-related learning opportunities and work experience placements.

72. Positive action is taken by partners to identify groups which are under-represented in education and training post-16 and recruitment strategies have been developed accordingly. Tracking of individuals who are not in education, employment or training is effective. This has resulted in a significant decrease in both this group and the number of children and young people whose current activity is unknown. These figures are good as they are well below those of neighbouring councils and the national average. However the drop out rate at 17 is too high and most teenage parents are not in education, employment or training. Midwifery services are offering pregnant teenagers referral to a specialist Connexions personal adviser to try and improve this. A high proportion of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are participating in employment, education and training and this is improving. However, the proportion of young offenders in education and training has been lower than the average, although recent indicators show that this is improving. The proportion of care leavers who are engaged in education, training or employment has risen significantly from below to reach national and comparator authority levels over the last two years.

73. Partnership work is becoming increasingly coherent. Provision for 14 to 19 year olds is planned collaboratively in response to a recent evaluation of the needs of children and young people, their aspirations and the opportunities available. Improved collaborative working is increasing access to a broader range of learning opportunities post-16. However, these opportunities are still insufficient, including the vocational opportunities for students who wish to follow non-traditional routes and Level 1 and entry level provision. There are also insufficient specialist post-16 education and training opportunities within

the borough for young people with complex or severe learning difficulties, many of whom have to travel outside the borough to access appropriate provision. However, effective and well coordinated action is taken by a range of agencies to support the transition of this group of young people into adulthood; transition planning has improved and is now good.

74. Joint working between the LSC and the council is improving and increasingly facilitates closer monitoring of post-16 provision. Council advisors work closely with schools, and the data monitoring achievement rates and value added are closely analysed. However, there is still too much variation in performance between secondary schools. Partnership working between the council, the LSC and other partners has ensured that the rate of improvement in achieving qualifications is increasing faster than that found nationally and many indicators show better than average attainment. For example, the performance of young people at A-level is improving and is above the national average. The majority of students make progress in line with or better than that predicted by their GCSE results and this is also improving. Where attainment is below average, for example Level 2 qualifications at 19, good targeted work is ensuring appropriate improvement. Although there are good examples of formal partnership working between schools, partnerships are not formally established in all areas and the effectiveness of joint working varies across the borough. The standard of work-based learning provision across the borough is satisfactory or better and in the further education college is improving from a low base. A key priority for Bexley is to raise the aspirations both of young people and of their parents. Progression to higher education is increasing and, although below the national average, is higher than neighbouring councils.

75. Nearly all young people have access to decent affordable housing. Bexley is currently on track to meet its affordable housing targets within the London plan. No homeless families are in bed-and-breakfast accommodation. The standard of hostel accommodation is good and there are good levels of young people in independent housing. There is good availability of supervised semi independent housing for vulnerable groups. The council and partners give high priority to meeting the housing needs of vulnerable groups leading to a significant decrease in homelessness. Arrangements for housing young offenders are good, with a sophisticated network of placements and there is little use of bed-and-breakfast accommodation.

76. Economic and community regeneration is targeted appropriately at the most deprived areas and addresses the broad range of family needs in an integrated way. There are good examples where residents, including children and young people, have been involved in the planning, management and review of community regeneration initiatives. Opportunities arising from new developments are regularly communicated to training and education providers through the 14-19 group.

## Service management

77. **The management of services for children and young people is good.** The council's ambition is good. It has a clear, strategic vision and an ambitious local agenda for service improvement both of which are detailed in the CYPP. Formal Children's Trust arrangements were agreed in June 2006 in advance of the October deadline for pathfinders. Governance arrangements are in place to help deliver the partnership's priorities. These include representation from two young people and two parents on the Children's Trust Board, and voluntary sector representatives on the Trust Board and Executive. Responsibilities and accountabilities at service delivery levels are being actively discussed, for example Local Cluster Boards led by headteachers. Arrangements are being informed by Bexley's Excellence Cluster model experience. The strategic vision and agreed priorities have been developed through a needs assessment which clearly focuses on children and young people with diverse and special needs. The views of children and young people are listened to and routinely taken into account through a range of consultation mechanisms. Ongoing participation is, however, less well developed.

78. Prioritisation is good. There is cross-party political support for children and young people's services. The council's priorities and community strategy, together with health and police partners' plans, demonstrate a shared commitment to putting children and young people at the heart of holistic working, including regeneration of socially deprived areas. The Local Preventative Strategy places a sound emphasis on early intervention and preventative services for example in children's centres and extended schools. The Children's Trust Board and Executive have set a challenging, collaborative agenda with 10 key priorities to be implemented through 31 actions. This provides the basis for an effective overarching strategic framework with appropriate links to the community strategy and an ambitious Local Area Agreement to be implemented from April 2007. A comprehensive project management system is in place which identifies work streams for the overall change programme. Timescales are ambitious and there is a risk that some targets may not be met. A strong focus on a number of priority areas has resulted in improvements across education, particularly at Key Stage 4, and in children's social care and health, supported by targeted investment. However, the speed of response to the recommendations in the last inspection of the local education authority was slow. Improvement plans agreed following the last Ofsted inspection are now in place but many policies and strategies are new and have not yet been able to demonstrate impact.

79. The capacity of the council and its partners to deliver better outcomes for children and young people is good. A well respected Director is supported by two enthusiastic and committed Cabinet members and a single overview and scrutiny committee is also operational. The Director is ably supported by five deputies, which confirms the council's commitment to ensuring sufficient senior managerial capacity. The integration of the single directorate and its ambitious integrated services programme is being undertaken on an incremental basis

rather than involving radical structural change. There has been a sound management approach to the change process based on visible leadership, shared values and a strong emphasis on minimising disruption to front line services. Attention has been given to clearly communicating the changes which has resulted in staff having a generally positive sense of ownership. Recruitment and retention initiatives are in place to address high turnover, and professional development and training is well regarded. A joint workforce strategy is being implemented supported by a shared training framework. There is good representation of minority ethnic staff in front line services working with children and young people, but an acknowledgement of a need to increase representation in headteacher and other senior management positions. A strong culture of partnership working and capacity building in Bexley has developed among statutory agencies and with the voluntary and community sector, for example through the Partnership of Parents and Providers of Children and Young People's Services (POPPYS). There are generally good inter-agency relationships at strategic and operational levels and the council is fulfilling its community leadership role, particularly through its Neighbourhood Investment Programme in disadvantaged areas. Relationships with schools and head teachers are improving. The council's self-assessment is reasonably accurate in identifying strengths and areas for improvement although the change programme's timescales are ambitious.

80. The council's and partners' capacity to improve is good.

81. Value for money is good. The council makes effective use of its resources and gives considerable priority to achieving value for money. There has been some under funding of social services in the past but education costs are in line with national averages. Although resources remain limited, budgets are generally well controlled. Budget reductions in 2005/06 protected front line children's services but future cuts will be happening and the council is seeking further efficiency savings. A series of strategic value for money reviews are achieving improved outcomes for lower costs, in areas such as special educational needs and PRUs. With its partners, Bexley has a good history of attracting external funding. This has been increasingly linked to strategic financial strategies, targeted at areas of disadvantage through the Council funded Neighbourhood Investment Programme and to improving school accommodation. A successful 'one school' pathfinder bid has secured £23million of funding. Alongside the integration of services there is an incremental approach to restructuring and integrating budgets. Robust monitoring of budgets and performance continues to be undertaken. The Directorate has started to examine ways of jointly reporting service performance and costs in a manner which more clearly reflects its integrated services, for example through the special educational needs review, to reduce costly out-of-borough placements for children with complex needs. Plans for joint commissioning are at an early stage although a draft strategy will be finalised later in 2006. There has been a cautious approach to pooled budgets, mainly because of the financial pressures on local health partners which are particularly acute at

present. However, new pooled funding arrangements are in place to provide additional capacity for the LSCB.

82. Performance management is adequate. Performance indicators have generally shown consistent improvement in the Children and Young People's Directorate with some above national and similar authorities' averages. The directorate has strengthened its performance management capacity and arrangements during 2006 to address areas of development arising from an external review it commissioned. Increased attention has been given to regular monitoring against performance indicators, key targets and stated priority commitments by senior management and councillors. Detailed data is produced monthly which covers, still in separate reports, education and social care performance. Analytical commentary is not aligned with the data pack but is included as an introductory summary as this is the Leadership Team's preferred format. Commentary on variances is included but trend analysis and benchmarking are limited. Managers are generally aware of how their services are performing and considerable efforts have been made to develop a wide range of directorate and service strategies and policies. The majority of these are not, however, supported by action plans which contain sufficiently SMART targets and outcomes to enable robust monitoring. Scrutiny challenge is good but could be improved by access to more up to date quarterly monitoring statements. Performance management across new partnership arrangements is at an early stage of development. An information sharing protocol has been agreed but there is limited collection and coordination of performance information on the effectiveness of partners' activities. An outline integrated planning and performance management framework is being designed for implementation early in 2007.

## **Annex: The children and young people's section of the corporate assessment report**

1. The council is performing well in meeting the needs of children and young people through its Directorate of Children and Young People's Services which was established in May 2005. The council's ambition and prioritisation is good. It has a clear strategic vision and a comprehensive project management approach driven by the strong leadership of the Director of Children's Services and her team of deputy directors. Cabinet Lead Members provide committed and enthusiastic support. There has been a sound management approach to the change process based on visible leadership, shared values and a strong emphasis on minimising disruption to front line services. The management of limited resources is good as is value for money, which is a key priority for the council. The priorities set out in the Children and Young People's Plan are appropriate and have cross-party political support. There is a strong picture of multi-agency working between education, social care and health and projects are being used to inform areas of partnership working. Some action plans have insufficient detail to enable detailed evaluation and inform future planning. The capacity of the council to continue to improve is good.

2. Health outcomes for children and young people are good and reflect highly collaborative partnership working. Well embedded multi-agency working is successfully promoting healthy lifestyles for most children and young people. A good range of multi-agency support services are available and accessible to most parents and carers, particularly for those with young children and for those whose children have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. These services include excellent support from the children's nursing team. Children's mental health needs are met well. There is very good provision to meet the health needs of looked after children, including good access to CAMHS and targeted support for sexual health.

3. Children and young people appear safe and social care services are good. Helpful and comprehensive information on a range of issues, including safety and anti-bullying is available to parents and carers. All cases are allocated, to a qualified social worker. There are good inter-agency policies and procedures which are consistently implemented and which help safeguard children and minimise the incidence of child abuse and neglect. Numbers of children on the child protection register are low. However, the quality of reports to child protection conferences and to reviews of looked after children are variable and sometimes lacking in sufficient analysis. There is a good strategy to address domestic violence and an effective programme of support from the police to help reduce this. There are good social care services for looked after children and for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

4. The contribution of local services to helping children and young people achieve well and to enjoy their education and recreation is adequate. There are a number of initiatives which are at an early stage of implementation.

Outcomes for children and young people at key stages 1 to 3 are broadly in line with national averages and are improving in line with national rates. However, the improved partnership with schools, higher quality data and a more rigorous strategy to monitor, challenge and intervene in underperforming schools, together with targeted projects to raise attainment and improve behaviour and attendance are beginning to make a difference. Attainment at Key Stage 4 is improving well. The monitoring of schools' performance has improved and is now more rigorous, leading to better focused intervention and support for schools. The council provides an appropriate range of recreational, leisure and cultural activities and there is good support for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to access these activities. The achievement of looked after children and young people is broadly in line with that found nationally and the procedures to monitor and support their education are comprehensive. The council has taken strategic action to control very high expenditure on special educational needs, with some success in making improvements to statutory processes. There are plans to increase provision for this group of young people within the borough and reduce the reliance on out-of-borough placements.

5. The council and its partners provide good opportunities for children and young people to contribute to society, for example through the Youth Parliament. However, young people do not always feel that the contributions they make, when consulted, are acted upon. The council, schools and the police are working together closely to address the concerns that young people have about racism and gangs. There is good support for children and young people to develop socially and emotionally, particularly for vulnerable young people at times of change, including when transferring to adult services.

6. The combined work of local services in helping children and young people to achieve economic wellbeing is good. There is good access to childcare provision and good information and support from a range of agencies to help parents and young people to take up opportunities in education, employment and training. There is good action to ensure that young people, including vulnerable groups, are in suitable accommodation. Partnership working for 14-19 education and training is increasingly coherent and is leading to improving curriculum opportunities. However there are still insufficient opportunities post-16, particularly for those students who wish to follow a non-traditional vocational route. The numbers of young people in education, employment and training is high against statistical neighbours although there remains a high drop-out rate at 17. The council's work on economic renewal is appropriately targeted and engages well with local communities. There are insufficient post-16 opportunities for young people with complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities.