

26 November 2007

Mr John Harris
Director of Children, Schools and Families
Hertfordshire County Council
County Hall
Pegs Lane
Hertford
Hertfordshire
SG13 8DF

Dear Mr Harris

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment for your local authority, some aspects of which were conducted at the same time as the analysis stage of the joint area review. The 2006 annual performance assessment informed the scoping of the joint area review at the planning stage and the initial findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment were taken into account by the review team at the end of the analysis stage. The outcomes of the joint area review were then considered alongside a review of recent data in arriving at the final annual performance assessment judgements for 2007. As a result, many of the areas for development highlighted in this letter align with the recommendations in the joint area review report and should be similarly aligned in any future action plan produced by the council and its partners. The judgements in the letter also draw on your assessment of progress or review of the Children and Young People's Plan where it was available, and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted and other inspectorates. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this and for the time given by you and your colleagues to the assessment process.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 2

The local authority consistently delivers services for children and young people at an adequate level. The education service makes a good contribution towards improving outcomes. Together, children's and families' services are making a number of significant contributions to improving the achievement and well-being of children and young people across one of the largest counties in England. However, the council makes an inadequate contribution to staying safe, and this significant weakness is sufficient enough to reduce the overall judgement to adequate.

Being healthy

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate.

Effective action has been taken to promote children and young people's physical health. A multi-agency teenage Pregnancy Strategy Group has been established. The number of teenage conceptions has reduced by a greater rate than in comparator authorities and by comparison with national rates. Targeted action in Stevenage to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy has been impressive, but the local strategic action partnership recognises the need to refocus this action to other districts in the county where conception rates are increasing. Sex and relationship education guidance and teaching resources have been sent to all schools; two outreach workers have been employed to target vulnerable young people and those in areas of high teenage conception rates. Focused workshops for tackling substance abuse and promoting sexual health have been provided in a variety of settings.

Multi-agency education programmes have helped to maintain the decline in the numbers of children and young people killed or seriously injured on the county's roads. The percentage of children and young people who are overweight or obese is in line with the national average. School inspection reports note that healthy lifestyles are effectively promoted for children and young people. However, the range of actions related to being healthy required of new child care providers was higher than average. Priorities and ambitions for promoting healthy lifestyles are clearly set out in the local area agreement. 'Hertfordshire Together', a local strategic partnership, is effectively targeting action to promote sustainable travel plans and improve the health of children and young people by encouraging walking or cycling to school. Inspection reports indicate nearly nine out of ten schools were judged to be making a good contribution to enabling learners to be healthy; nearly twice the national average. Two thirds of Hertfordshire schools have achieved the Healthy Schools status.

Action taken to promote children and young people's mental health has been adequate. The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) is developing a comprehensive service with regard to the provision of 24-hour coverage, access for 16- and 17-year-olds and for children and young people with learning difficulties. However, protocols and plans for a service for young people with more complex needs have yet to be implemented. The recently completed joint area review found that waiting lists for CAMHS have been long. Although these have recently been reduced, this has been achieved by raising the thresholds to access the service. Early access to CAMHS remains poor for children and young people with less complex needs. CAMHS has ring-fenced services, jointly funded by health services and Children, Schools and Families, which provide a counselling service for looked after children and young people, their supporting staff and foster carers. A dedicated CAMHS worker is linked to each children's residential unit.

The creation of a defined health team for looked after children and young people seeks to improve inter-agency working and to facilitate more effective progress in identifying and meeting their health needs. A specialist nurse for looked after children and young people provides good liaison with regard to health needs. Two further posts have been recently created, one of which will provide support to care leavers. Multi-agency funding for a designated doctor is now secured. Despite these initiatives, the most recent figures show the rate of annual health assessments and dental checks of looked after children and young people to be below that of similar authorities and the national average.

Areas for development

- Develop a CAMHS strategy for children and young people with less complex needs.
- Improve the rate of annual health assessments and dental checks of looked after children and young people.

Staying safe

Grade 1

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is inadequate. This judgement is in line, and draws substantially from, the wider safeguarding judgement in the recent joint area review.

Comprehensive safeguarding plans across the local partnership are in place but key operational processes in the children's social care service to safeguard children are inadequate. A Local Safeguarding Children Board with wide representation was established in April 2006 and inter-agency protocols are in place. However, there are a cluster of indicators around referrals, assessments, child protection issues and the deployment of qualified social work staff, which demonstrate that there remain some significant areas which now require urgent attention. Many of these were highlighted in the 2006 APA and were followed up in the 2007 joint area review report where they are exemplified in further detail. There have been improvements in performance from a low base, as a result of which these issues continue to represent significant weaknesses.

The data used to inform social care performance and to provide background information for practitioners is acknowledged by the authority as unreliable. Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checking within council services is not consistent. Recording systems and auditing processes are inadequate and the way in which guidance is interpreted is inconsistent. Whilst schools receive clear guidance on completion of CRB checks, school inspections have found the interpretation and application of this guidance to vary. There is no annual audit system at local authority level to ensure that all school staff and other adults have been appropriately checked, as required by national guidance.

School inspections show that good attention is given to health and safety issues. The Tellus2 survey notes that most pupils feel safer in the local community and when travelling to school than in previous years. However, pupils note that the response of school staff to bullying and harassment is variable. A quarter of pupils reported bullying to be a concern, although the Hertfordshire Anti-Bullying Initiative provides peer support training to significant numbers of children and young people. There is inconsistent reporting of racist incidents by schools.

There has been a reduction in the number of referrals of children in need, but Hertfordshire still has the highest rates of its statistical neighbours. There has been an increase in the number of referrals leading to initial assessments, but the number remains low by comparison with other authorities, as does the number of timely core assessments. The number of repeat referrals is low and this represents good performance, but there has been an increase in the number of children on the Child Protection Register or with a child protection plan who are not allocated to a social worker, and this remains an area of significant concern. The authority has taken steps to analyse the source of its referrals and review its eligibility criteria. However, Hertfordshire did not implement the Framework for Assessment of Children in Need as recommended by government guidance in 2002 and instead introduced a more limited process which does not clearly define the roles and responsibilities of other agencies. The common assessment framework, which will provide the required multi-agency working, is being piloted in one area of the county although the roll-out of this initiative within national timescales will pose a significant challenge. The timeliness of reviews of looked after children and young people has been well below similar authorities and national averages for some time. However, the proportion of children and young people who contribute to their reviews has risen significantly and is now in line with similar authorities. Whilst services to looked after children and young people are improving, performance management systems and data are currently insufficiently robust.

There are limited services to support families in difficulties and to prevent reception into care. As a result of this and other factors, there is a greater number of looked after children and young people by comparison with similar authorities, and the percentage who are allocated to a qualified social worker has further reduced from an already very low base. The percentage of looked after children and young people in residential care is at an acceptable level, but there has been a reduction in the numbers of those fostered by friends or relatives. Inspections of the council's residential homes show good attention to safeguarding.

Areas for development

- Improve the monitoring and recording of staff CRB checks.
- Secure the implementation of the common assessment framework.
- Improve performance on the application of eligibility criteria, referrals and initial assessments.

- Improve the timeliness of reviews of looked after children and young people.
- Increase the allocation of looked after children and young people to qualified staff.
- Ensure all children and young people with a child protection plan have an allocated qualified social worker

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good with a number of very strong features.

Some 82 children's centres are being created across the county; more than half of these will be operational by April 2008. Similarly, extended school consortia are being developed in 38 areas. Early years provision is good and outcomes continue to be above the national average. Overall, results in the national tests for pupils aged 7, 11 and 14 were above average in 2006. There was some variation in the proportion of pupils achieving the higher levels at Key Stage 1 but pupil performance at Key Stage 2 was well above the national average. At the end of Key Stage 3 performance in all core subjects continues to be above average, although one in six schools recorded a declining picture.

At the end of Key Stage 4 a higher percentage achieved five good GCSE passes than in similar authorities and nationally. Similarly, the proportion of pupils who achieve at least one GCSE pass remains above such comparators. The proportion of pupils achieving five good GCSE grades that include English and mathematics, the new national comparator, also produces positive outcomes. Six out of 10 secondary schools exceeded the national average and more than a third of all secondary schools achieved results well above the national figures in this new category. However, the results of one in 10 secondary schools were well below this benchmark. The value added by the weakest secondary schools remains inconsistent. The most successful schools clearly demonstrate good and sometimes outstanding achievement that masks weaker performance elsewhere.

The attainment of the relatively small proportion of Black and minority ethnic groups is generally satisfactory. In 2006, achievement by Black and minority ethnic groups at Key Stage 2 improved notably in English and generally the performance of Black and minority ethnic pupils at Key Stage 3 improved. However, the 2006 data reveal an increasing variation between Black and minority ethnic groups and the remainder of the authority's pupils in the acquisition of five higher grade GCSE (or equivalent) that includes English and mathematics. The percentage of looked after children entered for GCSE examinations was above the national average. The proportion that attained five higher grade GCSEs was just above the national figure but below the outcomes for the remainder of the school population.

Most children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have their learning needs met in mainstream schools. However, one in five schools expressed concerns about the effectiveness of the authority's intervention, assessment and provision for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. School inspections report that pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make similar progress to other pupil groups and better progress than found nationally. The percentage of children and young people with a statement of special educational needs educated in special schools is significantly above similar authorities. Inspection evidence reveals that pupils in special schools make good progress. However, the percentage of permanent and fixed-term exclusions from special schools is above the national average, having risen significantly in the last data year.

The proportion of excluded pupils who are provided with alternative provision has been amongst the lowest found nationally. Recently available unvalidated data indicate improvement from this low base in some parts of the authority. Key Stage 4 learning centres are gradually being opened. However, this multi-agency support for vulnerable pupils is not widely available. The growth in extended schools, crèches, out-of-school care, breakfast clubs and holiday play schemes continues to develop. There are good recreational and voluntary learning opportunities for children and young people across the county. Attendance in primary and secondary schools generally compares favourably with national figures and those for similar authorities. The rate of attendance of looked after children and young people is above the national average. The authority is taking steps to address this issue by using a dedicated service which provides robust data.

Support for schools placed in formal categories of concern by Ofsted is good and improving. Schools are being removed from these categories more quickly than in the past. New government initiatives for school improvement are being instigated and the proportion of schools in a category of concern is below the national average.

Areas for development

- Improve educational provision for children and young people excluded from school.
- Reduce special school exclusions.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate.

Early years settings make an effective contribution to young people's social and emotional development. Similarly, special schools provide excellent support for pupils' care and welfare. School inspection reports consistently grade pupils' personal

development and their care, guidance and support as good; many reports judge these areas as notable strengths.

The leaving care service changes introduced in April 2007 offer greater support for the majority, although some initial disruption to services for young people was noted by the joint area review.

A wide variety of processes have been used to gather the views of children and young people, and their parents and carers from minority communities to help inform provision. Well-targeted actions through the community-based 'Aiming High' programme are having a positive effect. The joint area review noted that the proportion of children and young people in care who contributed to their own review had risen significantly. However, the most recent data indicate the figures remain below that of similar authorities and the national average. Children and young people take the many opportunities provided to express their views at school. Looked after children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have been consulted on the specifications of new children's homes, but otherwise examples of children and young people's views influencing local strategic policies are rare. The music service continues to provide a wide range of opportunities for many young people to participate in community events. However, the proportion of young people reached by the youth service is less than a third of the national average.

School inspections note that overall behaviour is good. Although offending rates of young people from Black communities are above the county average there is little evidence of targeted prevention work. However, a number of effective initiatives have been put in place to support young people from Black and minority ethnic communities once they have offended. The percentage of those in care receiving a final warning, reprimand or conviction is above the national average. Specialised facilities for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are limited, but leisure centres provide very good opportunities for children and young people, particularly those with severe learning difficulties, to participate fully in activities.

Areas for development

- Improve the proportion of children and young people in care who contribute to their own review.
- Improve the reach of the Youth Service to be more inclusive over a wider range of young people.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate.

Hertfordshire now helps most looked after children and young people to raise their aspirations. The rapidly growing number of Children's Centres provides families with a developing range of support facilities. The quality of respite care for families under pressure is good although there are delays in making provision available. Good collaboration between education staff, Connexions, and youth workers helps to promote personal independence, especially among young people from Black and minority ethnic groups.

All secondary schools provide work experience opportunities and careers education with support from the Connexions service, although the range of vocational courses available varies considerably. The percentage of looked after young people engaged in education, training or employment at the age 19 is high and the proportion of young people from Black and minority ethnic groups similarly engaged is in line with the county average. Looked after children and young people have access to a good range of opportunities to boost their self-esteem and enable them to make the most of their lives. A higher proportion of looked after children and young people enter further or higher education, training or employment than in similar councils or nationally; thirty looked after young people are currently studying at university.

The recently completed joint area review found that quality of provision of services and achievement for young people aged 16 to 19 is adequate. The establishment of seven strategic area partnership groups across Hertfordshire is facilitating the implementation of an agreed 14 to 19 learner entitlement at a local level. However, the different strategic area partnership groups vary in their effectiveness and in the range of opportunities they provide. The lack of a co-ordinated approach to employer engagement and the needs for better mutual understanding between education providers and employers has been identified by the county's 14 to 19 Strategic Partnership Group. Sixth-form consortiums vary in their effectiveness and the range of opportunities they provide. Post-16 achievement is satisfactory overall, whereas up to age 16 the rate of pupil progress is above the national average. School inspection evidence confirms that the value added by the most effective schools is good and sometimes outstanding; however, this masks the significantly less effective provision found elsewhere. Attainment in all four colleges of further education has improved and is adequate. Good support is provided for the most vulnerable young people to achieve.

Some young people have been involved in community regeneration initiatives and others have contributed to events such as service reviews. There is a range of housing for young people leaving care; however, the proportion living in suitable accommodation is lower than in similar councils or nationally. Young people particularly value the support of the Connexions service and feel that it helps them to plan their future and manage the transition to independence. Inter-agency working is not consistently embedded across all services for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. However, services collaborate well to support looked after children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and much in-house residential care provision is good.

Areas for development

- Increase the proportion of young people from Black and minority ethnic groups in education, employment or training.
- Improve employer engagement in 14 to 19 Strategic Partnership Groups.

Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The capacity to improve, including management of services for children and young people, is adequate overall.

Whilst this is good for some aspects it is not yet sufficiently embedded or consistent across all areas. The significant areas for improvement identified in the 2006 APA staying safe judgement were not resolved and the recently published joint area review report judged safeguarding to be inadequate. In addition, the review noted a lack of clarity about where the oversight and leadership of priorities for children and young people from Black and minority ethnic groups lies within the Children's Trust Partnership. However, significant effort and resources are being deployed to address the concerns expressed in the review and the authority is being supported in this work by the Government Office for Eastern England and by the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Strong leadership, self awareness and effective partnership working are providing a clear direction and actions for improvement.

The accuracy of the data used to inform social care performance and to provide background information for practitioners was acknowledged by the authority to be weak; a new information management system is scheduled to become operational before Christmas 2007. The authority and its partners in the Hertfordshire Children's Partnership Trust have challenging ambitions for children and young people; prioritisation is adequate. As a result, services such as those to reduce teenage pregnancy have been targeted into the areas of highest need. Priorities for children and young people are clearly specified in the Children and Young People's Plan and action effected through partnership plans. Elected members are involved in corporate parenting and performance management and a progress report on the Children and Young People's Plan, 'One Year on', has been published by the Children's Trust. In some areas the priorities are driving forward service planning, improvement and informing staff targets. The authority is redirecting resources to support underperforming priority areas and has identified additional resources to support improvements in children's social care services.

Effective partnership working is increasing capacity to deliver outcomes, for example, through increasing levels of joint commissioning and plans for the further pooling of funds. Significant progress has been made in developing District Children's Trusts. Six Children's Centres are established and are delivering integrated services for

children and young people. Senior staff in the authority have a very clear understanding of the issues identified during the joint area review and safeguarding is an agreed priority. Appropriate use has been made of the time since the joint area review and support has been commissioned from external providers. The outcomes of this work will be judged in the 2008 annual performance assessment.

Significant numbers of CRB checks have been sought since the authority was made aware of the findings of the joint area review in order to bring organisational procedures in line with national guidance. School CRB processes were previously not audited. Although plans are proposed to do this every three years this will not provide sufficient confidence to the council that required checks have been undertaken, given the annual movement of staff. Performance management is improving. However until all data weaknesses are resolved the ability of senior staff to hold middle managers and their teams to account will remain inconsistent.

The capacity to deliver services for children and young people is currently adequate. The Hertfordshire Children's Partnership Trust has been established with sound governance and financial arrangements and partner responsibilities are clear. Partnership working with the voluntary sector is effective. Value for money is mixed but adequate overall. The authority spends more on personal social services per capita than similar authorities and there has been an increase in the percentage of actual expenditure on provision for children and families to a level that is now above that of both comparators and nationally.

The effectiveness of budget management is mixed. There is some joint commissioning with partner organisations and this is being extended to address weaknesses identified in the recent joint area review. The costs of out-of-county social services placements have not been controlled effectively with a £1.13 million overspend in 2005-06. The council is actively addressing the high levels of school reserves through a claw back scheme. Inconsistent budget management detracts from efficient service delivery.

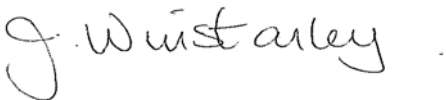
The council is taking action to improve staff capacity in children's social care. Training programmes increase the capacity of staff to deliver and plan services for children and young people. A capacity building team is being used effectively to develop management and supervisory skills in social work teams. The council has invested £2.3 million in extending the capacity of social work teams with the introduction of 42 new social worker posts and the appointment of ten additional managers. Over the last three years the council has implemented innovative plans, working closely with the Hertfordshire University, to address difficulties in the recruitment of social workers. Retention of social care staff has improved and, although the number of vacant posts remains high, over 30 qualified social workers will graduate from these schemes in 2007.

Areas for development

- Improve the retention of qualified social workers.
- Improve the quality of social care data.
- Performance management needs to be more robust.

The children's services grade is the performance rating for the purpose of section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will also provide the score for the children and young people service block in the comprehensive performance assessment to be published by the Audit Commission.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a period at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection