

26 November 2007

Dr Sonia Sharp
Director of Children and Young People's Services
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
Norfolk House
Walker Place
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Dear Dr Sharp

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN ROTHERHAM METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment for your local authority. The judgements in the letter draw on your review of the Children and Young People's Plan, your action plan arising from the joint area review and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. The letter comments on progress since the recent joint area review. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this process and for the time given by you and your colleagues during the assessment.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 3

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council's contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people is good. The council has acted promptly, and comprehensively, to address the recommendations from the joint area review, and there have been measurable improvements as a result. Significant progress has been made in the last year. In particular outcomes in relation to making a positive contribution have improved; the council's contribution to this area is now outstanding. A notable strength is the involvement of young people in offering opinions and making decisions about future developments. The council continues to make good contributions towards improving outcomes for being healthy, for staying safe, for enjoying and achieving and for achieving economic well-being. There have been some important gains in these areas, for instance in improving the weakest performing schools. The quality and stability of senior management, together with strong partnership working, have sustained continuous improvement in most areas over several years, demonstrating outstanding capacity to make further progress.

Being healthy

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. One recommendation emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the next six months

- Ensure more timely action for non-urgent paediatric occupational therapy cases.

There has been a full review of the occupational therapy service and triaging has been introduced prior to referral. Training has been provided for staff and parents and partnership working has been improved, for instance through the use of a questionnaire for parents and an advice line. The waiting time for non-urgent paediatric cases has been reduced by half.

Good and effective partnership working across health services has continued. Healthy lifestyles are well promoted in the community. For example, children's centres work closely with health professionals and run sessions on cooking, eating and fitness. This work is complemented in schools, where a strongly-led project has resulted in all schools participating in the National Healthy Schools Programme. Seventy two per cent of schools have achieved healthy status, a proportion that is well above the national level. The authority has also met its target for increasing the time devoted to high quality physical education each week.

Important gains with regard to health have included: a rise in initiating breast-feeding from 48% in 2005-06 to 53% in 2006-07; a reduction in smoking by young people, where the proportion is 7% lower than in 1998; and a fall in teenage pregnancies at a faster rate than nationally and in similar areas. Good progress has also been maintained in combating substance misuse. Nonetheless, there are areas where improvement is proving difficult. In particular, the infant mortality rate is relatively high, as is the proportion of babies with low birth weight, and the dental health of children and young people is poorer than average. These are areas the authority is tackling; for instance the dental health of five year olds in Rawmarsh has been improved through work involving the Sure Start programme. A rise in sexually transmitted disease amongst teenagers is being addressed through schools; in a national survey, pupils rated sex education highly. Similarly, almost all Reception and Year 6 pupils have been weighed and measured to provide a baseline from which to gauge the effectiveness of work on diet and exercise. Good partnership working is already beginning to address obesity, an issue that Rotherham has identified as a high priority.

The joint area review found that services for children and young people's mental health were good and that timescales for support were acceptable. Nonetheless, the strategy for mental health has been revised to speed up access and simplify

processes. For instance, the use of home visits has significantly reduced non-attendance. The Young Offenders Service is well supported in relation to mental health, through the training of staff and the work of a clinical psychologist. Referral rates, and the time taken to act, are better than those nationally.

A designated group oversees the good healthcare of children and young people in the care of the local authority. For instance, initial assessments and plans enable them to catch up on routine health checks. As a result, the proportion who have had dental examinations and immunisations has increased significantly.

Staying safe

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. Three recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the next six months

- Improve the timescales for completing core assessments of children in need.
- Reduce the number of changes of social workers for looked after children.

For action over the longer term

- Improve the range of carers who offer placements to children who are looked after by the council so that their varied needs are met.

There has been an audit of practice on core assessments, with monthly meetings to review performance. The proportion of core assessments for children in need completed within the set timescale has increased from 62% to 82%. This is a big improvement in performance to a position that is better than the national average.

The turnover in social workers has been considerably reduced and continuity has been aided by trainee staff becoming fully qualified. All children looked after by the council have an allocated social worker and steps have been taken to monitor and minimise the number of changes. In reviews, children who are looked after have expressed a higher level of satisfaction with their social worker.

Fostering services were rated as good in an inspection in March 2007, with good account taken of the needs of children, leading to stability of placements. The placements for children who are looked after by the council have been mapped in relation to, for instance, age, religion and gender. The fostering recruitment team has been strengthened and the number of foster carers has been increased by 8%. Effort has been targeted at areas of need, particularly foster carers with minority ethnic backgrounds. Foster carers are supervised and visited regularly and looked after children have good access to a complaints officer.

Rotherham has a well established Local Safeguarding Children Board that oversees good collaboration between the agencies that secure children and young people's safety. The board has been strengthened by the appointment of an independent chair. The recommendations from reviews of serious cases have been acted on promptly by all the agencies within the partnership.

Rotherham's schools receive high grades for their work in enabling learners to stay safe. Nonetheless, within a lifestyle survey around a half of young people indicated they had been bullied within the last year. The council has responded by making this a priority, as reflected in the appointment of an anti-bullying officer and increasing the support for victims. The most recent surveys have indicated that bullying is decreasing. Incidents of racism have fallen and the authority is meeting its target for reducing road accidents that involve children. In response to comments from young people, investment has gone into providing strategically sited games areas in parks and improving supervision, including the use of young people as voluntary wardens.

The joint area review found that arrangements for referrals and assessments in social care had improved significantly and were good. There has been a rise in the proportion of children on the child protection register, but this has stabilised and is similar to the national average. More assessments are being completed and in a faster time; however, the percentage being assessed again, having been deregistered, has risen to above average. All children on the child protection register have an allocated qualified social worker and all cases are reviewed on time. There has been a major increase in the level of social workers' qualifications, though figures remain below average.

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. No recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

Parents and carers are kept well informed about services, with the increasing use of technology such as touch screens and the Internet. Comments in the joint area review report related to the accessibility of information for parents of young children and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have been addressed through providing guidance to schools and area coordinators for early years settings. Almost all pupils are allocated a place at the school they choose and surplus places are low.

Early years education has continued to be well supported. Good provision is available for almost all three year olds, the maintained nurseries that have been inspected have been outstanding, and high grades have been awarded to the Foundation Stage in schools. Provision has been increased, including seven new children's centres. Children's attainment at the end of the Foundation Stage is below the national average, but the gap is closing.

The year-on-year rise in pupils' performance in tests and examinations stalled in 2006, particularly at the primary stage, where standards were below those found in similar areas. Overall, the pupils made the expected progress, given their starting points. At the secondary level, there was continued improvement in mathematics and science at Key Stage 3 and at Key Stage 4 the proportion of pupils gaining five higher grade passes at GCSE has increased at a rate above that nationally and in similar areas. Rotherham has acted promptly to analyse and tackle weaknesses, for instance by training Key Stage 2 teachers to set pupils the right level of challenge and appointing lead teachers of English for Year 9. Provisional results in the tests and examinations for 2007 indicate that momentum has been regained; standards are closing on the national picture and the action taken to improve English at Key Stages 2 and 3 has been successful. Initial results at GCSE continue the upward trend but there has been no overall improvement at Key Stage 1.

The school improvement service is good, especially in identifying and raising the performance of the weaker schools. The proportion of schools gaining the highest grade for overall effectiveness is slightly below average, but Rotherham's schools are very rarely inadequate. The proportion of schools in categories of concern is greatly reduced and none is subject to special measures; the proportion is below the national average and that of similar areas.

Attendance in primary schools is average. It is just below average in secondary schools, but within a generally improving trend, and specific action has increased attendance significantly in eight targeted secondary schools. The use of exclusion as a sanction remains low and targets have been met. The alternative provision for excluded pupils and their reintegration into schools are good.

Good and well coordinated support is provided for vulnerable pupils. For instance, those who are looked after by the council follow individual plans that are closely monitored, and they are helped with the loan of computer equipment and funding for additional activities. The performance of Rotherham's looked after pupils is improving; their attendance and GCSE results are better than those in similar areas. In 2006/07, for example, 68% gained at least one GCSE pass, compared with 50% in similar areas.

The council's policy for supporting pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is succeeding. The time taken to prepare a statement of special educational need has been cut. More pupils are being catered for within mainstream schools and fewer are educated outside the area. The special schools that were placed in categories of concern have improved well. There is a mixed picture with regard to the performance of pupils who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities; the proportion of pupils achieving at least one GCSE has improved to the national average, but the authority is rightly concerned about results in reading and mathematics at Key Stage 1.

Eighty five per cent of schools have been graded good, or better, for pupils' enjoyment of their education, and there is access to a wide range of enrichment activities, for instance in sport, hobbies and during the holidays. Good provision is

made for specific groups, including those with minority ethnic backgrounds. Out-of school provision has increased by 52%.

Area for development

- Improve attainment at Key Stage 1.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 4

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 has continued to improve and is now outstanding. No recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

There is a comprehensive range of opportunities for young people to develop socially and emotionally, and participants indicate that they are better able to deal with the problems and issues in their lives. Schools gain high grades for promoting their pupils' personal development and well-being.

Specific projects are enabling young people, especially those who are vulnerable, to address the changes in their lives, for instance through family group conferences and the Children's Information Service.

A particular strength is the work that allows young people a voice in important matters, such as senior recruitment and the council's vision and reviews of progress. A central youth cabinet has been proactive at regional level and in areas such as anti-racism, and almost all schools have established school councils. Rotherham was the first authority to gain the National Youth Agency quality mark, and 57 young people have been trained in quality assurance. In the last two years, £666,000 has been provided to fund young people's own projects, some specifically for those from ethnic minorities. An example of Rotherham's innovative approach is in enabling the young people involved in serious cases of social care to influence the recommendations that arise from reviews.

The Safer Rotherham Partnership has successfully focused on early intervention to tackle anti-social behaviour. In 2006-07 none of those referred to the Anti-social Behaviour Unit received a full order and re-offending rates by young people have fallen year on year. Within all aspects of the system, re-offending has fallen from 44% in 2003-04 to 25.4% in 2005-06. The service for young offenders was rated the fourth in England in 2006-07.

The joint area review rated the council as excellent in carrying out its corporate parenting role. Those looked after by the council have good opportunities to contribute to the key decisions about their lives. Where necessary, there is close cooperation with the Young Offenders Service, resulting in a significant reduction in offending by young people who are looked after. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are also closely consulted over the facilities and services that affect them, and over the reviews of their individual plans.

Achieving economic well-being

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. Two recommendations emerged from the JAR.

For action in the next six months

- Improve participation rates in post-16 education.
- Ensure borough-wide post-16 education and training options meet the needs of young people, including young people who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities and young people who have offended.

Much has been done to improve participation rates in post-16 education. Activities have included roadshows, parents' evenings, increased on-line information and an event at Hallam University that attracted 180 students and parents. There is good partnership working to provide accredited training. For example, a pilot scheme, Training Pays, has recruited 70 young people to train while at work. The proportion of 16 to 18 year olds in learning is 72.25%, up from 67.1% last year, and 84.2% of young people continue in learning after Year 11, in line with similar local authorities.

The headteacher of a special school has been seconded to investigate and improve the opportunities for those 14 to 19 year olds who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The transition plans for these pupils have been audited and they have been taught how to access adult services. The proportion of these young people in education, employment or training has increased from 50% to 70.3% since the joint area review. Three quarters of young offenders are also in education, employment or training, which is above average.

The overall picture on employment and earnings within the borough has shown above average improvement. In the last three years, Rotherham has received three Beacon awards related to economic growth. Within this, the businesses started by young people have survived well, and advice services have helped to increase significantly the take-up of benefits. The council's strategy for 14 to 19 year olds has been revised to secure young people's routes from school into further education, employment or training. The various partners work well together to coordinate provision, and close account is taken of the growth areas where young people are likely to find employment, such as in information technology-based work and call centres. Links with employers are strong and an enterprise scheme for schools has resulted in excellence awards from Warwick University. However, there has been only modest progress towards the introduction of the new diplomas for 14 to 19 year olds. The proportions of 19 year olds achieving Level 2 and 3 qualifications have increased at an above average rate between 2005 and 2006, though they remain below those nationally and in similar areas.

The success of partnership working is reflected in the significant increase since 2003 in the proportion of 16 to 19 year olds in education, employment or training. The

proportion in these categories, however, is below average, though there has been a valuable reduction in the percentage whose status is unknown. Rotherham recognises this as a key area and is working closely with, for example, schools and the Learning and Skills Council to secure lasting positions for those pupils who leave school after Year 11.

Those leaving the care of the local authority are well supported in their transition to independence and adulthood. All have pathway plans and they are helped with, for instance, housing, clothing and work placements. The proportion of these young people entering education, training and employment is above average.

Area for development

- Increase the proportion of 16 to 19 year olds who are in education, employment or training.

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

Grade 4

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is outstanding, and its management of these services is outstanding. Two recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For immediate action

- Improve information and access to services for young carers, so that more young carers can benefit from provision and all relevant agencies understand their needs.

For action in the longer term

- Ensure voluntary sector provision is part of a wider commissioning strategy.

Young carers have been involved in selecting Barnardo's as a new provider for their services and in interviewing for a full-time worker. Publicity for the services has been increased and questions for young carers have been included in a wider lifestyle survey to gain a better picture of their views and needs. Targets have been set for the numbers of young carers taking up the service.

Strong foundations have been laid to ensure voluntary sector provision is part of a wider commissioning strategy. A joint working group, including representatives of the voluntary sector and community, was set up in January 2007 and has produced a commissioning framework for implementation in March 2008. Current commissioning is being mapped to establish a baseline and for comparison with other local authorities.

The council has a very strong track record for improvement. It responded well to its 2003 report, as reflected in the joint area review report. It has acted thoroughly and quickly to address the issues raised a year ago, demonstrating that its capacity to improve has risen from good to outstanding. As the 2006 Comprehensive Performance Assessment commented: 'The quality and speed of its improvements have been notable.'

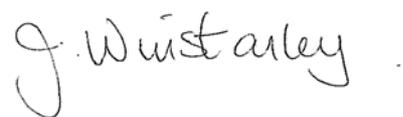
Rotherham's ambitions are clear, well-articulated and shared with partners. Priorities are well-judged, and based on close consultation and the needs of the community. Different agencies work closely together to a common purpose, as embodied in the Children and Young People's Partnership Board. Financial and performance management, and the use of resources, have been highly rated in recent inspections.

There is strong and stable senior management, with all major posts filled. Important attributes are energetic drive, a lack of complacency and the ability to gain the commitment of key sectors. For example, a survey by the Audit Commission shows that schools rate the council's work above, or well above, average in almost all aspects. An appropriate shift from remedial action to early intervention reflects both the gains that have been made and the determination to move forward.

Overall, the council has demonstrated excellent progress in meeting the recommendations from the joint area review, and has shown outstanding capacity to maintain and improve further its services for children and young people.

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 blue ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J'.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection