

26 November 2007

Mr Philip Mayhew
Acting Corporate Director of Education and Children's Services
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West Midlands
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Dear Mr Mayhew

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

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment (APA) for your local authority. The judgements in the letter draw on your review of the Children and Young People's Plan where it was available, and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this process and for the time given by you and your colleagues during the assessment.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 3

The overall effectiveness of the council's contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people is good. Outcomes for being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving and achieving economic well-being are good whilst outcomes for positive contribution are outstanding. A good level of service has led to improvements for most children and young people. For example, the number of teenage conceptions has decreased; educational attainment at Key Stage 1, 2 and 4 has continued to rise; and the percentage of care leavers in education, training and employment has increased. However, the council is aware of the inequalities that still exist between the north and south of the borough and some groups of children and young people. It has set challenging improvement targets and is taking appropriate action. The council has a good capacity to improve.

Being healthy

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. During 2006/07 developments in partnership arrangements have

improved outcomes for children. The Teenage Pregnancy Board merged with the Sexual Health Action Group to form a newly constituted Joint Sexual Health Strategy and Commissioning Group. This partnership has developed good systems for sharing information with GPs' surgeries to raise their awareness of local sexual health issues and enable specific targeting of high-risk groups. A teenage pregnancy strategy is in place and this has led to a decrease in the number of teenage conceptions. The infant mortality rate in Solihull is in line with the national average, as are immunisation rates. Perinatal mortality rates have fallen. However, the provision offered to expectant mothers is not fully supporting them to keep their children healthy. An increasing number of pregnant women in Solihull continue to smoke throughout their pregnancy and a low number initiate breast-feeding. The partnership has implemented strategies to address this.

The authority is making good progress in its delivery of the children's centres programme. There are three designated centres in the north of the borough and plans to designate more are well within timescales. These centres provide a good level of support to families with specific needs. For example, the 'Mellow Parenting' programme supports families facing issues such as alcohol and substance misuse.

Children's healthy lifestyles are effectively promoted and the majority of schools are judged as good or better in relation to this aspect. There is a very good level of participation in the National Healthy Schools Programme with 99% of all primary and secondary maintained schools taking part. Solihull is the only authority of those benchmarked to produce all fresh meals from raw ingredients in all of its primary schools. The local authority is at the start of a planned process to deliver a stretched target for the Healthy Schools accreditation within its agreed Local Area Agreement. To date, 13% of participating schools have achieved the new Healthy Schools status. This is much lower than the national average. The Schools Improvement Advisory Service is addressing this through their active involvement.

There has been good progress towards a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). All mental health patients under 18 years are cared for on wards specifically for children and young people. There has been good joint working with the youth offending team. CAMHS promptly undertake substance misuse assessments of young people. Effective links with other authorities ensure that there are good systems in place to offer an out-of-hours and outreach support service to meet the urgent health needs of children and young people.

There has been good engagement of young people with substance misuse issues. A specialist substance misuse service has been developed, which ensures the prompt screening and assessment of young people. The proportion of young people identified and receiving substance misuse treatment has improved (now 96%).

The percentage of looked after children and young people who had healthcare assessments is good. Eighty five percent of looked after children and young people had health and dental checks in 2006/07. This is above similar authorities and in line with the national average.

Areas for development

- Implement further multi-agency strategies to decrease the number of expectant mothers smoking and increase the number of mothers who breast-feed their babies.
- Increase the proportion of schools achieving Healthy Schools status.

Staying safe

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) is well established and is an example of good multi-agency working to promote safeguarding. The LSCB has been proactive in raising safeguarding awareness within the community and across agencies. It has effectively identified key risk areas, for example e-bullying.

Good preventative work is enabling more effective safeguarding of children. A range of initiatives engages parents and other professionals in order to improve outcomes for children from an early age. For example, social work support is now provided in primary schools, the Solihull Children and Families Support Model has been adopted and children's centres are offering parenting programmes. The Transforming Children's Services Strategy has resulted in improved staff recruitment and retention and an effective Duty and Assessment and Referral Team. The number of child protection referrals and re-referrals within 12 months has significantly dropped. There has been a reduction in the number of children on the child protection register and an increased number of children removed from the register or had their protection plan discontinued. Alongside this, there has been a significant drop in the number of re-registered children. All children in this group have an allocated qualified social worker. There has also been an improvement in the number of initial assessments completed within the statutory timescale and performance in this area is now above similar local authorities and in line with the national average. The number of core assessments carried out within 35 working days of commencement has improved significantly to 81% and is now better than the national average. All child protection reviews due within the year took place within timescales.

Schools generally promote children and young people's safety well. Inspections indicate that the majority of schools are good or better at ensuring that learners stay safe and none are inadequate. This is supported by the better than average rate of children and young people responding in the Tellus2 survey that they had never been bullied. However, 33% of children and young people responding to the Tellus2 survey report that their schools do not deal with bullying very well. Headteachers responding to the school survey report below average satisfaction with the way in which the council supports combating bullying, discrimination and racism. Similarly, children and young people report feeling less safe on public transport when compared with the national figure. The council recognises these issues and it is

implementing strategies to more effectively report, monitor and address incidents. Initiatives include governors, head teachers and young people actively involved in promoting community cohesion.

The number of looked after children and young people in Solihull has steadily increased since 2000 and is now significantly higher than in similar councils and the national average. The council attributes this rise to be the direct result of an increasing number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people arriving in the borough. This has led to a rise in the number of looked after children and young people cared for in residential children's homes with a disproportionate number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people aged over 16 placed in hostel accommodation. In contrast, the proportion of looked after children and young people from the borough placed in residential children's homes remains at an acceptable level, and only a small number are placed with relatives or friends. The number of looked after children and young people with an allocated qualified social worker has fallen from 100% to 88.4%, with higher rates of unallocated cases for unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people. An increasing proportion of looked after children and young people have participated in their reviews which is higher than similar authorities and the national average. However, only 78% of reviews of looked after children and young people are completed within timescales. The local authority has attributed this to the additional support required to ensure that unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people are fully engaged in the process.

The council has successfully addressed some areas for development identified within the fostering service. There is a good level of placement stability for looked after children and young people, and 67.5% have remained in the same placement for two years or more. However, there is not always adequate provision to support children and young people leaving care as the number with pathway plans and personal advisers has fallen. This is most significant for unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people where rates are well below the 100% rates provided to those leaving care from the local population. There has been a significant improvement in the number of children and young people adopted during the year, although placements take slightly longer to arrange than in similar authorities and those nationally.

Good multi-agency partnerships underpin positive developments within the services for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. For example, more young people now receive direct payments that enable them to purchase services that best meet their needs. The authority has devised a strategic action plan to further improve these services.

Area(s) for development

- Implement effective strategies to ensure all children and young people feel safe from bullying and racism.

- Ensure all looked after children and young people, including unaccompanied asylum seekers, are allocated qualified social workers and have timely reviews.
- Ensure all care leavers have sufficient access to personal advisers and have pathway plans.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The quality of Early Years provision and nursery education ensures children get a good start to their education. A majority of settings are judged to be good or better. The percentage of children reaching the expected Level 6 in the early learning goals is above the national average. Standards at Key Stage 1 are consistently above similar authorities and the national average in reading, writing and mathematics. National test results at Key Stage 2 show a steady year on year improvement in attainment with children and young people attaining well above the national average in all core subjects. Performance at the end of Key Stage 3 is generally above the national average and in line with similar authorities. Rates of progress are at least satisfactory between Key Stages 2 and 3. The authority acknowledges this as an area for improvement and it is effectively supporting schools with tracking children and young people's achievement and setting challenging progress targets. The value added from Key Stages 3 and 4 is good and above the national average. The proportion of young people gaining five grades at A* to C in GCSE examinations is above that of similar local authorities and well above the national average.

The progress of vulnerable children and young people in the authority is variable but improving. Good progress has been made to increase the proportion of young people leaving care with 1 GCSE at grade A* - G. The percentage of young people leaving care with 5 or more GCSEs at grade A* - C is also well above the national average and similar authorities. School inspections indicate that those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make at least good progress. In contrast, the achievement of particular Black and minority ethnic groups and those in disadvantaged areas remains an issue as their attainment is below the borough average. The authority has responded appropriately to this area for development by improving the tracking, monitoring and analysis of rates of progress. It is now able to identify the groups of children and young people that are underachieving, plan targeted interventions and provide appropriate levels of support to schools. These combined actions are closing the attainment gap.

The authority is improving its knowledge of its schools through its annual review process. It is classifying schools that are causing concern so that it can accelerate progress through targeted interventions. Although this proactive approach is

reducing the number of schools causing concern, the proportion does not compare favourably with the national average and similar local authorities.

Attendance continues to be in line with national averages and similar authorities. The number of permanent exclusions in primary and secondary schools remain below the national average. Inspection findings indicate that the majority of children and young people enjoy being at school and behaviour is good or better. The Building Learning Power programme, introduced into schools across the authority, is effectively promoting strategies for children and young people to successfully work and learn together.

The council places a strong emphasis on developing children and young people's enjoyment. The views of children and young people inform the authority's comprehensive play policy. The council has appointed a play development worker and increased the number of recreational activities available at weekends and during holidays. Two school sports partnerships have had a positive impact on the number of children and young people participating in physical education.

Areas for development

- Improve the rates of progress between Key Stages 2 to 3.
- Raise the attainment of vulnerable children and young people and continue to close the gap between those who do most and least well.
- Reduce the proportion of schools causing concern.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 4

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is outstanding. There is an excellent level of involvement and consultation with children and young people through a very active youth council. Children and young people play a crucial role in shaping council services and determining future work. Through the Children's Panel, the council has consulted with children and young people about the re-organisation of schools within the authority. Children and young people have been involved in the appointment of staff and have been asked to report their views directly to the council. Most notably, two of the priorities set out in the Children and Young People's Plan are a direct result of their involvement. There is also a very good level of consultation with children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. For instance, they work with their support staff to express their views about the services that affect them.

There are several initiatives across the borough to support children and young people's emotional development and to prepare them for the future from an early age. Initiatives include the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) and Building Learning Power programmes, nurture groups and child and family support

workers in schools. These recognise the importance of building a solid emotional foundation and help children and young people to become more effective and independent learners. In addition, Aim Higher mentors encourage good rates of young people going on to post-16 education.

There is an effective youth service that responds to the needs of the young people it serves. The youth offending team undertakes positive preventative work aimed at young people at risk of anti-social behaviour. As a result, the number of first time entrants to the youth justice system and proportion of re-offenders is lower than in similar authorities. However, there has been a slight reduction in the proportion of young people reached by the service.

There is a successful multi-agency partnership to address the level of street crime in the borough. Initiatives include: projects in local parks, work with mobile telephone outlets to combat theft, police involvement in schools, programmes in personal social and health education (PSHE) to raise crime awareness, diversionary activities, additional inspector support on buses at high risk times, and texting safety messages to children and young people. In addition, the North Solihull Fusion project has contributed to an 11% decrease in street crime rates.

The number of looked after children and young people who participate in their reviews and are able to express their opinions is higher than similar authorities and the national average. In 2006/07, 95% communicated their views. The percentage of looked after children and young people who were given a final warning or reprimand is lower than similar authorities and the national average. A particular strength is the development taking place within the service where social workers are training young people to lead their own reviews.

Areas for development

- Increase the number of young people reached by publicly funded youth services.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. There has been a good increase in the number of childcare places offered, particularly in the number of full day care places. This has improved the support to families in the workplace. The proportion of children and young people living in households where no one is working has reduced. It is below the national average. Inspections indicate that the majority of schools make a good contribution towards developing children and young people's workplace skills.

The percentage of young people achieving Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications has increased year on year, and is now above the national average and close to similar authorities. Attainment in General Certificate of Education (GCE), A/AS level and

Vocational Certificate of Education programmes is improving year on year. Nonetheless, it is below that of similar authorities and the national average. The authority has identified the reasons for this underperformance and is developing a wide range of initiatives to improve post-16 provision. Good partnership work with the Local Skills Council has led to the development of a 14–19 strategic framework that promotes a collaborative approach towards increasing attainment. The Uplift Programme, for example, engages young people who leave school early and offers opportunities for formal and informal qualifications with a view to returning into mainstream education.

Good collegiate arrangements are broadening choices for children and young people, including vulnerable groups. Schools, colleges and local businesses are working together well to develop a range of vocational diplomas and to increase the number of work related placements. The authority is also successfully identifying, tracking and supporting children and young people who are at risk of disengagement. As a result of these preventative measures, the percentage of young people not in education, employment or training is significantly decreasing. In addition, the percentage of looked after young people and care leavers in education, training and employment is increasing and is now well above similar authorities and the national average. The proportion of work-based learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has also increased. Despite these positive trends, the percentage of 16–19 year olds re-engaging in employment education or training remains below similar local authorities and national averages.

As a result of a strong working partnership with Community Housing and Connexions the percentage of care leavers at age 19 who are living in suitable accommodation has improved significantly, from 85% in the previous year to 100%.

Areas for development

- Improve attainment of post-16 students.
- Continue to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training.

Capacity to improve, including the management of children's services **Grade 3**

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council's capacity to improve, including the management of children's services is good. Strong and visionary leadership has effectively worked in partnership with key strategic partners to evaluate progress and set challenging and appropriate targets for improvement. The review of the 2006 Children and Young People's Plan is comprehensive and accurately identifies strengths as well as relative weaknesses. Good progress has been made in most outcomes. For instance, the recording, monitoring and evaluation of the performance of groups of children and young

people particularly those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds was an area for development. It is now a considerable strength. The current Children and Young People's Plan takes account of the views of parents, children and young people. In fact they have been instrumental in setting two of the priorities.

There is a high level of investment in services to children and young people and a good level of social workers and care managers employed to work directly with them. There is a low level of vacant posts and an average turnover of staff. Despite this positive picture there remain some looked after children and young people, and care leavers, without a full package of staff support particularly for unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people. The local authority, through the Children and Young People's Plan is targeting these vulnerable children and young people as a priority. A procurements manager is now in post to ensure value for money and choice in placements for children and young people. Although the cost of placements has reduced from the previous year, they are still higher than in similar authorities and the national average.

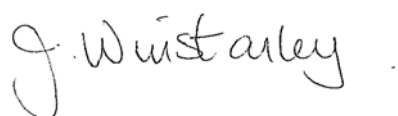
The council and its staff and elected members are committed to further improving the outcomes for all children and young people in Solihull and ensuring that all children and young people have an equal chance of success. They have placed a strong focus on prevention and early intervention and established good performance management arrangements.

Areas for development

- Continue to improve the value for money of placements for looked after children and young people
- Ensure that resources are deployed effectively to further enhance the support available to unaccompanied asylum seeking 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 and will be published by the Audit Commission.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection