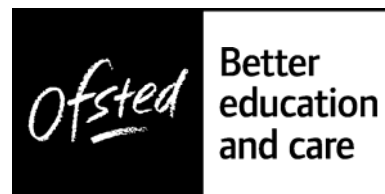




Making Social Care Better for People



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1 November 2006

Dear Mr Christie

2006 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

This letter summarises the findings of the 2006 Annual Performance Assessment process for your local authority. The judgements reflect the outcomes of the joint area review and the updated self-assessment provided by the council. This letter should be read in conjunction with the report of the joint area review published in April 2006. We are grateful for the information provided to support this process and for the time made available by your colleagues to discuss relevant issues.

Summary

Areas for judgement	Grade awarded ¹
The contribution of <i>the local authority's children's services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people.	3
The council's overall <i>capacity to improve</i> its services for children and young people.	3
The contribution of <i>the local authority's social care services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people.	2

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Grade	Service descriptors	Capacity to improve descriptors
4	A service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users	Excellent / outstanding
3	A service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for users	Good
2	A service that delivers only minimum requirements for users	Adequate
1	A service that does not deliver minimum requirements for users	Inadequate

The joint area review (JAR) found that overall outcomes for most children and young people in the London Borough of Brent are good. Agencies work well together to protect children and young people most at risk. There are strong child protection systems that keep children safe and, overall, the work of all local services in keeping children safe is adequate with some significant strengths. Children's health is promoted effectively. Children and young people make good progress in well supported schools and further education. Local services are effective at helping children and young people to develop socially and emotionally.

The JAR noted that despite these good outcomes, further progress was required to develop joint working in order to provide responsive integrated services. The JAR team judged that Brent was well placed to deliver this progress. The updated self-assessment, the JAR action plan, and the finalised Children and Young People's Plan all confirm the council's good capacity to make further improvements. Despite the short period of time since the publication of the JAR, the council has taken appropriate steps to implement the recommendations from the JAR. A significant challenge in developing greater joint working and integration is to secure the financial commitment of all partners.

Being healthy

The JAR found that the council's contribution to healthy outcomes for children and young people was good. It highlighted the need for the following action to be taken within six months of the publication of the report:

- improve services to looked after children by ensuring that foster carers and other staff are able to provide good support in matters of sexual health and relationships.

The council has implemented a training programme for carers and one is also planned for other staff. The training is being delivered in liaison with the health team for looked after children.

There were two other issues of note for improving health in the JAR report.

First, although the report comments favourably on access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) through community based initiatives, the access of the Youth Offending Team (YOT) to CAMHS was unsatisfactory and there was no formal referral system.

The council has responded appropriately by recruiting a community psychiatric nurse for the YOT and making all referrals within the recommended timescales.

Second, the level of health checks for looked after children in 2004/05 was low. This has now improved following a refocusing of the work to provide dedicated health support.

Staying safe

The JAR found that the contribution that the council's services made to keeping children and young people safe was adequate and the JAR highlighted the need for the following action to be taken:

Immediate:

- ensure all first reviews for looked after children are held on time.

Within six months of the report:

- set challenging targets to improve recruitment and retention of social workers in all teams
- improve services to looked after children by reducing the proportion in residential placements or placed at a distance from the borough
- improve services to children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their families through:
 - increasing the responsiveness of children and families services to meeting their support needs and
 - ensuring services to meet their assessed needs are delivered.

The council has set targets to reduce staff turnover and increase the number of permanent social workers by 25% in both the Referral and Assessment and the Children in Need teams by the end of March 2007. The council is reviewing its recruitment and retention strategy and benchmarking its staffing and caseload levels with comparator councils. The council has a reported staffing vacancy rate of 10% in children's social care services. This is much lower than comparator councils but the recruitment and retention strategy is also intended to increase the proportion of permanent staff over agency staff.

The council has introduced a new process to ensure that the looked after children review team get early notice of new placements. Performance has improved since the JAR but will need to continue as a priority to reach 100% of initial reviews taking place within timescales.

The JAR found that there was some delay in dealing with social care referrals due to insufficient staff capacity at times of higher rates of referral. Promptness of initial and core assessments were slower than comparator averages. The rate at which initial assessments of referrals was carried out in 2005/06, was half that of the previous year and much lower than the comparator average, with an increase in repeat referrals. Following an audit of thresholds for assessment, an adjustment has been made. More recent information shows an increase in the percentage of referrals receiving an initial assessment.

To address the issue of the high proportion of looked after children placements out of borough and in residential care the council has decided to increase local placement choice and has begun to review its commissioning strategy by considering a professional fostering

scheme, and by exploring the potential for smaller children's homes within the borough. The contracts' monitoring capacity has been strengthened by an additional post.

The council plans to improve the responsiveness of services to children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their families by integrating assessment teams to reduce duplication and extending the use of the Common Assessment Framework across these teams. The council is seeking to recruit more family based respite carers and has had some initial success. Families are also making good use of 'care at home' and increasing applications for Direct Payments.

Enjoying and achieving

The JAR found that the contribution that the council's services for children and young people make to improving outcomes in this area was good. It highlighted the following action to be taken:

Immediate:

- implement rapidly the plans to provide full time provision for all pupils permanently excluded from schools.

Within six months of the report:

- improve services to looked after children by raising their educational achievement.

The council has responded appropriately in planning to set up a separate unit for Key Stage 2 excluded pupils at an existing primary school from September. This will release additional spaces for pupils of secondary school age at the Brent Education Tuition Service. Plans for developing the new Pupil Referral Unit and youth centre at Chalkhill are proceeding and the new building is likely to be ready by September 2007. In the meantime, temporary premises are being set up to cater for 20 pupils excluded from school. The significant rise in permanent exclusions of pupils of secondary school age, noted in the JAR, has slowed.

The council is aware of variations in the achievement of different groups of pupils, including those from some minority ethnic groups. The council aims to improve the educational achievement of looked after children through a strategy steered and monitored by a cross-departmental group, with targets integrated with the Local Area Agreement. Action includes additional resources for the looked after children education team, giving more support to looked after children placed out of the borough and ensuring they all have a personal education plan which also addresses out of school activity. The gap in achievement between these groups and other pupils in Brent continues to close slowly.

Performance data from 2005, validated since the joint area review, confirm that standards are slightly below average at Key Stages 1 and 2 and average at Key Stages 3 and 4. Value added between key stages is good and pupils generally achieve well. Support for schools causing concern is judged as timely and effective. Two primary schools, identified

as causing concern in their recent Ofsted inspections, had already been identified as such by the council and have been receiving support to make improvements. A third school has recently been removed from a category of concern following good support from the council.

Making a positive contribution

The JAR found that the contribution that the council's services for children and young people make to improving outcomes in this area was good. It highlighted the need for the following action to be taken within six months of the report:

- increase the rate at which planned changes are implemented through the following development projects:
 - integrated services covering all age groups and
 - transition arrangements.

There are clear indications that the council is working to improve integration of services through the Disabled Children Project Group. The group has three sub-groups co-ordinating the needs of children and young people of different age groups. The council has drawn up guidelines to tighten procedures for young children, especially those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, from non-maintained early years settings into schools. The smooth transfer of pupils between primary and secondary schools is a high priority in the council's action plan. Having completed an audit of the current position and the range of issues around continuity of the curriculum between these phases, the council is creating a seconded post for two days per week to develop work on the transitional curriculum.

Achieving economic well-being

The JAR found that the contribution that the council's services for children and young people make to improving outcomes in this area was good. It highlighted the following actions to be taken within six months of the report:

- finalise, and implement, the 14–19 strategy and action plans, to include improved data in order to plan suitable progression routes for young people
- improve services for looked after children by ensuring that care leavers are appropriately prepared for independent living.

The council has completed the consultation process on the draft 14-19 strategy and finalised its five year strategic plan for 14-19 education. This takes forward the shared vision of all its partners. Actions for 2006/07 have been prioritised and include appropriate targets to improve access to work-based learning and vocational programmes; to improve the progression pathways of young people and to meet the needs of the local economy. Links between institutions are improving and partnerships between secondary schools are developing across the borough. The council expects that these partnerships will lead to the first diploma pathways being offered to young people. Links with the college continue to

develop with, for example, a new course in September for engineering. Training on work-related learning for senior staff and careers events for staff, employers and key partners have been well attended.

The council now has appropriate plans to develop a life skills training programme to ensure that care leavers are better prepared for independent living.

Service Management

The JAR found that the management of services for children and young people was good and Brent's capacity to improve was good. It highlighted the following action to be taken within six months of the report:

- ensure rigorous monitoring of targets and performance indicators by key strategic and operational partnership groups to ensure outcomes are being achieved.

To meet these recommendations the council has the following actions underway:

- the council has now published its Children and Young People's Plan. Key objectives and targets have been agreed and are in the appendices to the plan
- the Children and Young People's Partnership Board has set up a multi-agency performance management group to monitor and report regularly to the Board on progress against targets. High level targets are reflected in operational business plans for units within the children's services department
- the Local Safeguarding Children's Board has established a monitoring and evaluation sub-committee to specifically look at monitoring safeguarding activity and trends.

The council has demonstrated good progress in the time available in meeting the joint area review recommendations. It has good capacity to further improve its services for children and young people.

Yours sincerely



FLO HADLEY

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Office for Standards in Education



JONATHAN PHILLIPS

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Commission for Social Care Inspection