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Mr Gerald Meehan
Strategic Director for Children and Young People
Halton Borough Council
Municipal Building
Kingsway
Widnes
Cheshire
WA8 7QF

Dear Mr Meehan

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Halton Borough Council 2008

This letter summarises the findings of the 2008 annual performance assessment (APA) for your council. The evaluations and judgements in the letter draw on a range of data and information which covers the period 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008. As you know, the APA is not based on an inspection of your services and, therefore, can only provide a snapshot based on the evidence considered. As such, I am grateful to you for assuring the quality of the data provided.

Performance is judged on a four point scale as detailed in the handbook. I should emphasise that the grades awarded are based on an overall 'best fit' model. For instance, an outstanding judgement of Grade 4 reflects that overall most aspects, but not necessarily all, of the services in the area are working very well. We know that one of the features of outstanding provision is the drive for greater improvement and no council would suggest, and nor would Ofsted, that a judgement of outstanding indicates that everything is perfect. Similarly within a judgement of inadequate overall, Grade 1, there could be some aspects of the overall service that are adequate or even good. Judgements are made in a rounded way, balancing all of the evidence and giving due consideration to outcomes, local and national contexts, priorities and decision-making.



The following table sets out the grades awarded for performance in 2008.

Assessment judgement area	APA grade
Overall effectiveness of children's services	3
Being healthy	3
Staying safe	4
Enjoying and achieving	4
Making a positive contribution	4
Achieving economic well-being	2
Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people	4

*Inspectors make judgements based on the following scale
4: outstanding/excellent; 3: good; 2: adequate; 1: inadequate*

Overall effectiveness of children’s services

Grade 3

Halton Borough Council delivers services for children and young people that exceed minimum requirements and are good overall. The council’s capacity to improve is outstanding. This confirms the grade awarded in the recent JAR. Since the APA in 2007, services have continued to improve in many outcome areas. Standards in educational achievement have improved significantly at GCSE and the rate of progress over time is impressive. The council has made excellent progress in reducing waiting times for those requiring child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). Performance in reducing the overall number of young people not in employment, education or training has slowed recently, as has the rate of improvement in the percentage of young people achieving Level 2 qualifications by the age of 19. The council has acknowledged that these aspects of delivery require further improvement and has taken robust action to accelerate progress. Early evidence indicates improvements are being achieved. The views of children and young people are given great importance at a strategic level and assist in the planning and shaping of services. Most children and young people, including those from vulnerable groups, are positive about the services they receive.

Being healthy

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The council’s analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There has been outstanding improvement in performance in reducing CAMHS specialist and non specialist waiting times during the last year. The performance of the service is now better than that found in similar council areas. ▪ All schools are participating in, and most (88%) are achieving the National Healthy Schools status. These proportions are significantly better than those for similar council areas. ▪ The health needs of looked after children and children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well met.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Despite a fall in the rate of teenage conception in 2006 the council’s performance remains below that of similar councils and the England average. ▪ There is a high infant mortality rate.

Staying safe

Grade 4

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is outstanding. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The recent JAR judged safeguarding arrangements to be outstanding. Children benefit greatly from highly effective policies and procedures which ensure levels of risk are kept to a minimum. ▪ An exceptionally low number of children aged 0 to 15 are killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents. A significant reduction (-88%) has been achieved since the baseline year which is significantly better than statistical neighbours (-51%) and national (-52%) averages. ▪ The quality of early intervention is excellent and there is a wide range of responsive and locally-based services for children and families.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p>

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 4

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is outstanding. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of young people achieving five or more A* to C grades in GCSE is now above that found in similar council areas. The rate of improvement is faster than the national average. ▪ Improvement in secondary attendance was the second best achieved nationally showing significant and impressive improvement for the fourth consecutive year. ▪ Strong improvements in levels of attainment and attendance for vulnerable children and young people has considerably narrowed the gap between these groups and others of similar age, for example, all looked after children attained the expected Level 4 in English at the end of Key Stage 2 and all of those entered for GCSE obtained at least five A* to G grades. This is significantly better than the national average for that group of 63.7%. ▪ Improvements in Key Stage 2 tests in 2007 were the second best achieved nationally. ▪ There has been an impressive increase in progress made by children in secondary schools. The contextual value added scores for these learners exceeds the national average by a considerable margin.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Despite improved results in English at Key Stage 3 in 2007, progress in this subject is significantly below that of similar councils. |
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Making a positive contribution

Grade 4

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is outstanding. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development for this outcome area is consistent with the evidence.

Major strengths

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rates of re-offending are falling more rapidly than in similar areas. They are now 7.8% lower than in similar areas and nearly 1% lower than the national average. ▪ The number of young people (35%) accessing publicly funded youth services is significantly greater than the national average (28%). ▪ The recent JAR judged that consultation and engagement of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in school councils and local decision-making is genuine and well founded. ▪ The number of looked after children contributing towards their reviews is better (98%) than statistical neighbours (96%) and national averages (91%). |
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Important weaknesses and areas for development

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 2

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The council's analysis of its strengths and areas for development in this outcome area underestimate a number of important weaknesses and overvalue the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

Major strengths

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There is a strong 14–19 strategy based on good collaboration and a clear focus on partnership. The proportion of young people in Year 11 moving on to further education is improving and the number of apprenticeships is rising. ▪ There has been a marked improvement in the proportion of looked after children engaged in employment, education or training. ▪ The proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds whose current activity is not known, at 4.8 % is lower than statistical neighbours and the national average and has dropped significantly this year. |
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- Due to targeted work there has been a 3% reduction from 14.85% to 11.85% in 17-year-olds in not in employment, education or training. This remains a high figure but the rate of reduction is good overall.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The proportion of young people aged 16 to 18 who are not in employment, education or training at 11.5% is well above the national and above similar councils.
- The proportion of young people achieving Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications by the age of 19 remains below that in similar council areas. Earlier progress in improving performance at Level 2 has not been maintained.

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

Grade 4

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is outstanding. This confirms the judgement awarded in the recent JAR. The impressive GCSE results have set a solid base for improved achievement at A Level in the next few years. Management of these services is rigorous and the council's ambition to significantly improve the life chances for children and young people in the area is at the heart of the council's drive for improvement. Children's services are well led and in a strong position to maintain their impressive track record of securing improvements. Collaborative partnership working is strong and there is a well established commissioning of services from voluntary and community groups. Children and young people are very well engaged in service development. Value for money is good and improving; service review is leading to better outcomes at the same or reduced cost, for example in school effectiveness. Since the previous APA, the council has maintained and improved its performance in almost all areas. However, the council acknowledges that the number of young people not in employment, education or training needs to reduce more rapidly. New leadership and governance arrangements, a new 14–19 strategy and increased investment provide some indication of the council's commitment to this.

Major strengths

- The recent JAR judged capacity to improve to be outstanding.
- Sustained high outcomes and improvement in safeguarding and positive contribution.
- Significant and rapid improvement in GCSE results.
- Excellent response to waiting times for CAMHS non-specialist services.
- Priorities for improvement are securely based on good consultation with children, young people and communities.

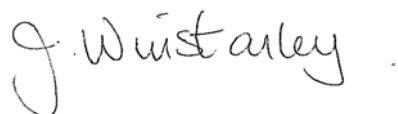
Important weaknesses and areas for development

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Increase the numbers of young people achieving Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications by the age of 19. |
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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.

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.

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