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17 December 2008

Mr David Taylor
Corporate Director of Children and Young People
Somerset County Council
County Hall
Taunton
TA1 4DY

Dear Mr Taylor

Annual performance assessment of services for children and young people in Somerset County 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	3
Enjoying and achieving	2
Making a positive contribution	3
Achieving economic well-being	3
Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people	3

*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

Somerset County Council provides good services for children and young people and overall delivers above minimum requirements.

Priorities are clear and are underpinned by detailed analysis and comprehensive data. Most of the areas for development in the APA 2007 have been addressed effectively, although other important weaknesses have arisen. Health outcomes are generally good and the council has continued to engage well with children and young people. The proportion of children and young people in education, employment or training, including those who are vulnerable, is higher than for similar councils and nationally. The council has strengthened its local area partnerships to extend the range of vocational qualifications. Safeguarding arrangements appear good. The common assessment framework is still at an early stage of implementation. The council is effectively improving some aspects of its educational provision. The council has been particularly successful in raising standards for children and young people in Key Stage 2 and recently reducing the number of exclusions from schools. However, standards for children and young people aged 11 to 16 years are not improving quickly enough and exclusions from one special school are high.

Children and young people’s services have good capacity to improve further. Areas for improvement are known but the pace of progress is sometimes slow.

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"> ▪ Services are targeted to areas of known inequality. Breast-feeding initiation rates are above the national average. Access to sexual health services has improved significantly. ▪ All schools are engaged in the National Healthy Schools Programme and progress has exceeded national milestones. ▪ There is good and timely access to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) for children and young people, and links have been strengthened with non-specialist services.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The rate of conceptions amongst 15- 17-year-old girls has increased. ▪ There are long waiting lists for paediatric occupational therapy services in some parts of the county.

Staying safe

Grade 3

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect appears to be 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"> ▪ Referral processes are managed well. The timeliness of assessments has improved and is now similar to other councils. ▪ Prompt action has been taken in response to serious case reviews.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There has been limited use of the common assessment framework although training across agencies has taken place. ▪ Longer-term stability of placements for looked after children is not as good as that of similar councils.

Enjoying and achieving

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 underestimates a number of important weaknesses and overvalues the areas where progress has been made. The table below sets out the evidence for the grade awarded.

<p>Major strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Standards at Key Stage 2 have risen faster than the national rate and the proportion of children and young people gaining Level 4 or better in English, mathematics and science is now slightly above that for similar areas and nationally. ▪ Attendance at both primary and secondary schools is higher than in similar areas and nationally. ▪ Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive good support at an early stage which results in a high proportion of them being educated in mainstream schools and a much lower proportion being issued with a statement of special educational need than found in similar areas or nationally.
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of children and young people gaining five A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics is slightly below that found in similar areas and the rate of improvement is slower. ▪ Standards at Key Stage 3 are lower than in similar areas and the rate of improvement in the proportion of children and young people achieving Level 5

or better in English, mathematics and science is slower than for similar areas and nationally.

- Fixed term and permanent exclusions from primary and secondary schools have been higher than similar areas and nationally in recent years. The proportion of pupils excluded from special schools for a fixed period is much higher than in similar areas and nationally.

Making a positive contribution

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.

Major strengths

- There are effective opportunities for children and young people to express their views and to influence the development of services.
- The percentage of looked after children contributing to their reviews has increased to a good level and is above that of similar councils.
- Effective action has been taken to reduce the rate of re-offending.

Important weaknesses and areas for development

- The proportion of looked after children who were given a final warning/reprimand or who were convicted of an offence has remained at a high level for seven years.

Achieving economic well-being

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.

Major strengths

- The proportion of young people in education, employment or training is consistently higher than for similar areas and nationally.
- The proportion of young people achieving Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications by the age of 19 is higher than for similar areas and nationally.
- Support for vulnerable young people, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, those who are looked after and teenage mothers, enables a high proportion to access work and training.

<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The proportion of looked after young people who are eligible and receive a pathway plan is consistently lower than for similar areas and nationally. |
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Capacity to improve, including the management of children’s services

Grade 3

The council’s capacity to improve its services for children and young people is good and its management of these services is good. It has a clear vision, shared with partners, for the development of its children’s services. The council has appropriate priorities based on the effective use of data and resources are targeted to areas for improvement. The CYPP is based on a comprehensive analysis of needs, which has included the views of parents, carers, and children and young people.

Children’s services are becoming increasingly integrated and there are good examples of developing partnership work, for example in provision for young people aged 14 to 19 years. Improvements have been made in most areas identified for development in the last APA. However in some areas the pace of improvement has been slow.

<p>Major strengths</p>

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Good prioritisation based on thorough analysis of need. ▪ Strong partnership work, supported by budgetary re-alignment and evidence of directing resources to priority areas. ▪ Improvements in staying safe outcomes. |
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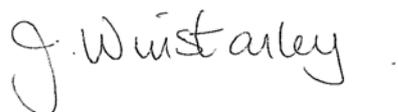
<p>Important weaknesses and areas for development</p>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Action to improve areas of underperformance is not always having sufficient impact in some aspects, for example offending rates of looked after children. ▪ Progress in improving educational outcomes is inconsistent across key stages. |
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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