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Making Social Care
Better for People



Mr David Taylor
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Dear Mr Taylor

ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SOMERSET COUNTY COUNCIL'S EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SERVICES 2005

This letter summarises the findings of the meeting held on 21 June 2005 to assess the performance of the education and social care services within your authority. We are grateful for the information which you provided to support this process and for the time made available by yourself and your colleagues to discuss relevant issues.

Being healthy

Outcomes in this area are good. Healthy life-styles are promoted effectively in many schools and through the youth service. However, this work has not been a sufficiently high priority in all areas: the good standards achieved in secondary school sport need now to be reflected more consistently in the primary phase. The incidence of teenage pregnancy is below the national average in all but one of the district council areas. Good use is made of detailed ward-level data to target neighbourhoods where conception rates remain relatively high. The council has been able to provide examples of well designed services which address the health needs of vulnerable groups, including young people with substance misuse difficulties. The number of qualified social workers employed in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is below comparable authorities and a target has been set to increase the overall staffing capacity of the service over the next 12 months.

The council collaborates well with the Primary Care Trusts and the Strategic Health Authority. Partners are working well together to design services which reflect a more pro-active and preventative health care approach. Children and young people who are looked after receive a good service and their health is monitored regularly. The allocation of a full-time nurse to this group has assisted in maintaining year-on-year improvement which is above the national average.

Staying safe

Outcomes in this area are generally good. Looked after children and young people have stable placements in comparison to the national average. The identification of need through a core or initial assessment is good in respect of the time taken to reach a conclusion. All children and young people placed on the child protection register are allocated a qualified social worker. A robust approach to monitoring and quality assurance ensures that all child protection plans are reviewed within acceptable time scales.

There is good and improving performance in reducing the time that children and young people are on the child protection register. The percentage of children and young people placed on the register is substantially lower than most other authorities and reflects the emphasis the council places on alternative approaches to working with families where there is concern, such as complex family support meetings. This is an area the council is currently reviewing to ensure that the threshold between family support meetings and child protection conferences is appropriately set to ensure that those at risk receive a safeguarding service. The council is providing training to all children services' staff to help them understand the clear distinction between these two approaches. Previous poor practice, as identified in the conclusions of the most recent serious case review, are being used to assist staff in understanding how poor practice can occur in this area.

In-house residential provision is also under review, as part of the strategy to move a from a traditional children's home model towards one that is more flexible in meeting individual needs. This is intended to reduce the current high occupancy rate in each unit and address concerns identified by regulation inspectors.

Enjoying and achieving

Outcomes in this area are good overall, although standards in some schools have remained static for too long. Teaching in early years is effective and children make good progress in meeting early learning goals. The council has achieved Beacon status in recognition of its work with partners in early years and childcare settings. At the end of Key Stage 1, results are in line with national averages in all subjects. Children make at least satisfactory progress to Key Stage 2, where results are also in line with national averages and above statistical neighbours for science. Good progress is made between Key Stages 2 and 3. Standards for Key Stages 3, 4 and 5 are generally in line with national averages and statistical neighbours, however, the proportion of pupils

achieving A*- G grades at GCSE level has recently slipped below statistical neighbours. The council recognises that this overall positive picture masks patterns of under-achievement by some groups of children. Good strategies are in place to raise the attainment of boys, particularly at Key Stage 2, and of all pupils in maths. It is too early to judge the full impact of interventions, however the council anticipates improvement in this year's Key Stage 2 results.

Outcomes for looked after children are good compared to national indicators, however their performance last year at Key Stage 4 did not meet the council's own challenging targets. Continued improvement in educational outcomes for looked-after children is a priority in the draft Children and Young People's Strategic Plan. The quality of support and provision for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities is a significant strength and many achieve positive educational outcomes. The strategy has been to reduce the reliance on statements in favour of early identification and tailored support for children and families. This approach is proving effective. An increasing proportion of young offenders are in education or training, although there still some way to go to reach the challenging national targets.

The number of schools in the county in special measures is below the national average. The council has taken decisive action over the past few years to put in place more robust measures to identify schools in difficulty and to intervene at an early stage to bring about improvement. Achievement data is used systematically to analyse and monitor performance and the self assessment acknowledges that a minority of Somerset's schools could still perform better than they currently do.

Attendance is improving and compares favourably with similar authorities. There are low rates of absence generally in both primary and secondary schools. The attendance of looked after children is improving steadily, but overall absences remain slightly above comparators. Exclusion rates have risen across the county as a whole and a relatively high proportion of those excluded in the latter part of their secondary education remain out of school for over 12 months. The council is working closely with head teachers through the Somerset Education Policy Team to improve pupils' behaviour and prevent exclusion. Restorative justice projects run by the Youth Offending Team in targeted schools have had a positive impact on the attitudes and conduct of pupils most at risk, as well as wider school approaches to inclusion.

A good range of leisure and recreational activity is provided by the council and other agencies. Holiday play schemes support families of children with disabilities effectively. Although many young people have access to opportunities for personal development outside of school, the choices for those in rural communities is sometimes more limited. The council is taking positive steps to improve access and provision through its work with organisations in the voluntary youth and community sector.

Making a positive contribution

Outcomes in this area are good overall. The council has a variety of strategies in place to ensure the involvement of children and young people in shaping new services and improving existing ones. The 'Hear by Right' programme is making good progress with the expectation that all targets will be met in 2006/7. The council identifies the need for more coherence in its approach to participation to avoid duplication and to make the most of the lessons learned from children and young people's feedback thus far.

Children and young people who are looked after participate regularly in their reviews. Effective support is provided for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities to help them contribute to decision-making about the services they receive. There are some good examples of partnership work which is helping to promote young people's active involvement in the community. Re-offending rates have dropped from 38% in 2001 to 21% in 2003, although action to reduce first-time offending is not yet impacting fully on the number of new young people coming into contact with youth justice services. The rate of offending by looked after children fell last year, however the number of final warning/reprimands for those in residential care remains relatively high and is an area for further improvement.

Achieving economic well-being

Outcomes in this area are good. There has been wide consultation to inform the development of a broader and more responsive curriculum for the 14 – 19 age group. Links with the local Learning and Skills Council, providers in the further education sector and local employers have been effective in developing new provision. A growing number of schools and colleges offer vocational and flexible programmes of study. The quality of some provision is very good, although this is not consistently the case across the county as a whole. A high proportion of young people continue in learning at 16, but retention at age 17 remains an area for improvement.

Many looked after children and those with disabilities are also helped to achieve greater economic independence. The council recognises the need to continue to focus on vulnerable groups who face particular challenges at key transition points. For example, young people living in rural areas often have more limited access to suitable courses, particularly at Level 2. The council is working closely with the Connexions and other partners to ensure greater consistency in the quality of careers information, advice and guidance provided in its schools.

SUMMARY

Strengths	Areas for improvement
<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good health outcomes for looked-after children • effective health promotion in many schools and through the youth service • effective specialist health services for vulnerable children and young people. 	<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increase the staffing capacity of CAMHS, specifically the number of qualified social workers • embed good practice in the Healthy Schools programme across all schools.
<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stability of placements for looked-after children • timely initial and core assessments • child protection conferences: reviews 100%. 	<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue to monitor the balance between family support meetings and child protection conferences • complete the review of in-house residential provision.
<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high quality provision in early years. • support for children and young people with special education need and/or disabilities • good attendance and low rates of absence • good range of leisure and recreational activities. 	<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduce exclusion rates and time spent out of mainstream education • reduce the gap in performance between boys and girls • improve achievement in the minority of under-performing schools, particularly at Key Stage 2.
<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wide range of consultation and participation activities • reduction in re-offending rates. 	<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure coherence in the approach to participation and young people's involvement • continue to reduce rates of first-time offending, particularly by looked-after children.

<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increase in the breadth of the 14 – 19 curriculum • good support for looked after children and those with special educational needs at key transition points • increasing number of young people progressing into education, employment and training. 	<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improve retention rates of young people at 17 • ensure information, advice and guidance in schools is of a consistently high quality.
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Service management

Following the recent alignment of the education and social care departments, the council is now in a strong position to address the priorities set out in its draft Children and Young People’s Plan. The corporate director has a good understanding of the challenges which still lie ahead which are now agreed priorities. The new vision for children’s services has been developed following extensive consultation with key partners and endorsed by the county council. There is strong support and involvement from elected members in programmes for looked after children and those with special education needs and/or disabilities. The council is building effectively on its long standing partnerships with other agencies, including health, the police and district councils.

There is good awareness of the needs of vulnerable children which is helping to inform to service development. There are clear strategies to strengthen further the links with organisations representing minority ethnic communities, for example, the appointment of a link person to ensure effective communication with the Chinese community.

The capacity of the children service’s workforce is being developed. The staff recruitment and retention strategy is effective, although further work is required to attract staff from under-represented groups. Both education and social care are well advanced in bringing about workforce reform and modernisation. The strategy to build locally based multi-disciplinary teams around cluster groups of schools is at an early stage of development. The council is committed to developing services which can respond flexibly to local circumstances. Performance management arrangements are improving, however, a more robust approach to the supervision of staff, specifically in residential settings, remains an area for development.

Joint planning to ensure fully integrated services is also at an early stage, including work on information sharing and the development of a common assessment framework. That said, at local level, many long-established partnerships already serve children and young people very well. A more rigorous and systematic approach to the evaluation of their impact on outcomes is an area for further development, and will better place the council to make judgements about value for money.

The council has good capacity to improve further.

Areas for exploration in the joint area review

Being healthy

Action is taken to promote children and young people's mental health:

- workforce issues in relation to social care and CAMHS.

Staying safe

Children and young people are provided with a safe environment:

- further exploration of the balance between child protection conferences and complex family support meetings.

Enjoying and achieving

Action is taken to ensure that educational provision 5 – 16 is of good quality:

- under-achievement by identified groups of children and young people and under-performance in a minority of schools.

Making a positive contribution

Action is taken to prevent offending and to reduce re-offending by children and young people:

- offending by looked after children, particularly those in in-house residential provision.

Achieving economic well-being

Action is taken to ensure that 14–19 education and training is planned and delivered in a coordinated way, and to ensure that education and training (16 – 19) is of good quality:

- quality of impartial information, advice and guidance in schools and retention rates post-16.

Final judgements

Please see your final annual performance assessment judgements attached at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely



FLO HADLEY
Divisional Manager
Office for Standards in Education



JONATHAN PHILLIPS
Director – Quality, Performance and Methods
Commission for Social Care Inspection

APA final judgements 2005: Somerset County Council

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

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