

26 November 2007

Mr Peter Traves
Corporate Director of Children & Lifelong Learning
Staffordshire County Council
County Buildings
Tipping Street
Stafford
Staffordshire
ST16 2DH

Dear Mr Traves

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN STAFFORDSHIRE COUNTY 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 2

Services provided by the council have strongly improved from the last assessment. This has been brought about by rigorous evaluation informing priorities for further action, a commitment to partnership working and a determination to do better. Although a majority of services are now good with a strong trend of improvement evident in the others, significant elements in achieving economic well-being and enjoying and achieving remain adequate. On balance the overall effectiveness of children's services is adequate.

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. There is a strong emphasis on improving healthy lifestyles for children and young people and in overcoming health inequalities. The Healthy Schools programme is on track to meet targets in the local area agreement but not all schools are participating. North Staffordshire and South Staffordshire Primary Care Trusts recognise that the school nurse resources that are needed to support the programme are currently stretched and coverage is only adequate. There are plans

to address this. The local community and learning partnerships have commissioned an innovative food growing programme in schools to support healthy eating and sports equipment is funded in a range of settings to promote additional physical activities.

There has been very good progress in providing greater access to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) with a wider range of services in the community and a good reduction in waiting times. Coordination across the county is greatly improved with easier access to comparative data. CAMHS preventative strategies are effectively linked to behaviour strategies and multi-agency work with parents. At the time of the last assessment, two targeted CAMHS projects were being implemented in schools. A thorough evaluation of these initiatives shows the positive impact they have in improving teachers' awareness of mental health issues and making it easier for pupils to seek help. There is prompt access to substance misuse treatment, particularly for young people who offend. Although the rate of misuse in some of Staffordshire's towns is rising faster than in the country as a whole, the council has responded well by providing effective diversionary projects in targeted areas.

Parents and carers get good support to keep their children healthy. Nearly all eligible GPs across the county offer child-health surveillance from their practices. Immunisation rates are higher than national averages. However, many key health indicators, such as the birth weight of babies and the death rates of children under 15, vary across the county. There is a real understanding in the Children's Trust of the impact of preventative work and the Children and Young People's plan sets out how the council intends to minimise these variations. There is a highly collaborative approach to setting up health resources for groups such as young parents in children's centres. Children and young people's views have been influential in raising the priority of work to prevent or reduce obesity although it is too soon to see any impact. Staffordshire rates of teenage pregnancy are lower than those found nationally and focussed work has resulted in an adequate downward trend against the 1998 benchmark. There has been a consistent rise in the proportion of looked after children and young people who get regular health and dental checks. A very good 88% get these checks compared to the national average of 84%. The increased number of specialist respite care beds for children and young people with disabilities allows very good access and promotes continuity of health care. Four multi-agency resource panels have been set up to promote equity of access to responsive health care resources for children and young people with disabilities.

Area for development

- Increase the target percentage of schools to be involved in the Healthy Schools programme.

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 joint area review in 2005 judged children's social care services as inadequate. The council has brought about a rapid and sustained improvement since then so that this area is now good.

A sharp focus on corporate parenting responsibilities and an emphasis on the individual needs of looked after children and young people have brought about a good rate of improvement in the provision of safe, suitable placements. The proportion of looked after children and young people in the area living in stable placements is higher than the national average. Adoptions take place promptly and good use is made of kinship placements. An excellent proportion of looked after children and young people, 99.3%, have qualified social workers. Robust action has brought about a rapid improvement in the number of looked after children's reviews being held on time. The proportion of looked after children and young people participating in their reviews is very good when compared with the national picture. Inspections find that safe environments are provided in the overwhelming majority of schools, early years and care settings. Children and young people are given constructive advice on keeping safe in an extensive range of areas relevant to their lives such as the internet.

A cultural change has ensured that the responsibility for safeguarding is effectively spread across agencies, and preventative work, including family support work, is shared. New structures in social care teams have been well received by staff and users. There is now good access to support, particularly for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their families. Much work has been done to clarify thresholds for services and assess needs within the nationally agreed timescales and performance in completing initial and core assessments within expected timescales is adequate. Child protection cases are all held by qualified social workers and are well managed with reviews being held on time. The ending of protection registration is carefully considered, ensuring that very low percentages stay on the register for over two years. The Staffordshire Local Safeguarding Children Board has developed a comprehensive business plan. Strong contributions from agencies have brought good collaboration to reduce abuse and neglect, for instance through multi-agency protocols on domestic violence.

Area for development

- Increase the proportion of initial and core assessments of need completed within the nationally agreed timescales.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The provisional data for the 2007 national tests indicates a good improvement over the 2006 results. Children make good progress during the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 so that by the end of Year 2, standards are above average. Progress during Key Stages 2 and 3 is slower than that made in Key Stage 1 but nevertheless standards are still just above average. The council through its intervention strategies have brought about marked improvements in progress at Key Stage 4.

Similar good improvements have been made in the achievement of vulnerable groups. Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities now do better than their peers nationally. The achievement of looked after children and young people has improved and is now adequate. The gap between the achievement of Pakistani children and all children was rapidly closing in 2006. The progress of children and young people who do not attend school is now recorded centrally. Individual progress is tracked against predictions based on prior attainment following government guidance. Tracking shows this group of children make satisfactory progress.

Progress in school sixth forms is slower than that seen during the years of compulsory schooling although the rate at which the council is closing the gap with comparable authorities is satisfactory. Standards are just below average but rising at a satisfactory pace. The council is well aware of this relatively weaker area of its performance and is taking appropriate action to bring about improvement. Overall achievement and standards, apart from those for 16- to 19-year-olds, are now in line with those seen in comparable councils.

Children enjoy school. Attendance remains good and exclusions are lower than in similar councils. Good progress has been made in establishing community and learning partnerships. Thirty-four partnerships are up and running and a further sixteen are planned. Although it is too soon for any impact to be seen in the performance data, the partnerships have facilitated much improved collaborative working between the different agencies operating in the same locality. A recent survey of children and young people shows that they would like more access to high quality leisure, cultural and sports experiences. Plans are in place to address this.

Area for development

- Improve achievement especially in school sixth forms.

Making a positive contribution

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. Children and young people are well supported in their social and emotional development and services work well together to support identified vulnerable groups at times of change in their lives. The proportion of looked after children and young people and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities taking part in reviews of services provided for them is good.

Children and young people are encouraged to participate in an outstanding range of decision making processes, contributing to the review of the Children Young People's Plan and representing their views directly to elected members of the council. Many have diverse opportunities to volunteer through the Millennium Volunteers and the Duke of Edinburgh schemes and support their communities with clear benefits for those that take part. In the best consultation plans, good consideration is given to how to include the highest possible numbers of all ages, minority ethnic groups, looked after children and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, although inclusion of all groups is not yet always a matter of routine. A mobile 'Big Bruvver diary room' van was used to gather the views of some of the hardest to reach children and young people. Although this innovative approach was effective where it was deployed, gathering the views of hard to reach groups is insufficiently systematic. A small number of skilled young people are involved in implementing 'Hear by Rights' standards in a further two departments of the council this year. The work of the Children's Commissioner is beginning to impact on the extent of participation.

Collaboration to reduce anti-social behaviour is embedded across a very wide range of agencies with good effect in local areas where diversionary activities take place. The Youth Offending Service has a better record than the national average in preventing re-offending and offers access to a wide range of support. However, the number of young people offending for the first time is rising faster than among statistical neighbours and nationally. Swift multi-agency action is being taken to reduce this trend including developing new protocols with the police.

Areas for development

- Ensure that ways of consulting with young people and opportunities for participation systematically reach diverse groups and all ages to increase participation as widely as possible.
- Improve action to reduce the incidence of first time offending.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The council has established a strategic partnership with the Staffordshire Learning and Skills Council. Together they have increased collaboration amongst schools, colleges and work-based learning providers to improve the range of vocational courses on offer. Plans are in place to ensure a good range of vocational courses are accessible in all parts of the county and protocols have been agreed between providers to ensure there is no unnecessary duplication of provision. Regeneration activity in several parts of the county is being used to create new vocational learning and training provision. For example the recently opened Torc vocational training facility in Tamworth provides 234 new places in 7 vocational areas. The provisional 2007 GCSE results suggest that this facility is successful. Schools approve of the action the local authority has taken to improve the vocational provision for children and young people. The local authority is on course to meet the September Guarantee of training or learning places for all young people who seek one. Consequently the proportion of children and young people accessing vocational courses is increasing. Although there is a lot of activity in this area, the 14–19 strategy has yet to impact on standards for 16- to 19-year-olds.

The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training is good because it is below that of comparable authorities. Aspects of the council's work which were judged inadequate at the last assessment have all improved. Extra resources have been committed to support the economic well-being of looked after children and young people after compulsory schooling has finished. Consequently the proportion staying in education and training has increased noticeably and is now good. The proportion of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities remaining in education and training after the age of compulsory schooling has also improved and particularly so for those with the greatest need of support. However, the proportion is still below that achieved by comparable councils. There has been an increase recently in the numbers of young people presenting with serious housing needs. Data is now being collected and is beginning to inform commissioning. Although the council's work in this area has improved, it recognises it still has more to do in ensuring young people have decent housing. The council has very good information about local child care needs. The growth in child care provision is meeting local needs.

Area for development

- Ensure that young people's need for decent housing is met.
- Increase the proportion of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities remaining in education and training after the age of compulsory schooling.

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

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

There is a strong track record of improvement which compares well with similar authorities. The Children and Young People's Plan sets out an ambitious vision for the future of the council's services. The quality of strategic planning is excellent and evaluation of its implementation is incisive. Accordingly there is clarity about how the vision will be delivered and what the immediate priorities are. A commitment to partnership working has been secured and the benefits of different agencies sharing expertise and collaborating more closely together are beginning to become apparent. This commitment goes beyond 'paying lip service' to the concept of partnership working and is a real strength. Resources are well managed and targeted effectively to meet identified needs. Performance is carefully monitored and good value for money obtained.

Consequently there are strong trends of improvement in most outcomes. Access to CAMHS has been enhanced and the range of services offered extended. The joint area review in September 2005 judged the outcomes for staying safe to be inadequate. In just two years the council has brought about a remarkable improvement in this outcome which is now judged to be good. Targeted interventions have improved achievement and particularly so at Key Stage 4. Minor elements of other areas that were unsatisfactory at the time of the last assessment have been dealt with and are now at least adequate.

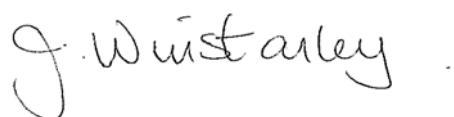
Some of the improvements seen are relatively recent. The council recognises that it needs to consolidate the gains made whilst continuing to drive further improvement in two services where the outcomes remain adequate overall. There is a good capacity to continue to improve.

Area for development

- Improve the outcomes for enjoying and achieving and for achieving economic well-being.

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.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and a period at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection