

26 November 2007

Mr D Taylor  
Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services  
Somerset County Council  
County Hall  
Taunton  
Somerset  
TA1 4DY

Dear Mr Taylor

## **2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOMERSET 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, your action plan arising from the joint area review (JAR) and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. The letter comments on progress since the recent JAR. 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 3**

Somerset County Council consistently delivers above minimum requirements. The council has responded positively to recommendations raised in the JAR. For example, good progress has been made in improving services to support schools in managing behaviour and ensuring schools with Foundation Stage provision receive appropriate support and challenge. The contribution the council makes towards improving outcomes for children and young people overall remains good. Universal health services contribute well to good outcomes for children and young people and improvements to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are being secured. Strong partnerships, such as that demonstrated in the 14–19 partnership, are effective in sustaining good outcomes for children and young people, in this instance in achieving economic well-being. The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) is another example of a good partnership having a positive impact. The contribution the council makes towards improving outcomes for enjoying and achieving is adequate. The council has acted decisively to halt a declining position but standards attained by children and young people in national tests and examinations remain adequate. However, there is demonstrable evidence that action taken by the council is making a difference in improving educational outcomes for looked after young people. Children and young people are consulted well and their views influence service development. Good progress has been made in providing

coherent, integrated services for children and young people and there is a strong commitment to improving all services.

## **Being healthy**

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. There are no marked inequalities in health across different areas of the county. Rates of breast-feeding are higher than those found nationally and rates of expectant mothers smoking are low. The proportion of babies with low birth weight is low. Childhood illness rates are comparatively low and oral health is good. While the teenage pregnancy rate remains low, there is one area of the county where there are higher deprivation levels, where the rate is significantly higher than the rest of the county. Services have been appropriately targeted to this area including the opening of a young people's sexual health clinic in June 2007. The council continues to be very successful in engaging schools in the National Healthy Schools Programme. Good and rapid progress has been made in increasing the number of schools achieving National Healthy Schools Status, with the proportion of schools accredited being above the national target. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities with complex needs continue to receive a good service. However, those with less complex needs can experience delays in the provision of services, equipment and adaptations. The council has taken steps to remedy this situation through the appointment of additional local occupational therapy staff.

Completion of annual health and dental assessments for looked after children and young people have fallen slightly over the last three years. The completion rate of 77% is lower than other south west councils. The council's analysis shows a marked difference between children and young people placed in foster care and those in residential care. Only 43% in residential care accessed health assessments in the year to September 2006. The current mechanism for engaging looked after teenagers in their health assessments does not enable all of the needs of these young people to be addressed. For example, looked after young people have no choice in the gender of the health professional to whom they are assigned.

One recommendation emerged from the JAR.

### **For immediate action**

- Ensure that clear referral pathways to the new community mental health worker service are established and that the criteria for access to specialist CAMHS teams are similarly clear.

Sound measures are being taken to address the long standing difficulties that prevent children and young people having appropriate levels of access to CAMHS support. These measures focus on resolving the difficulty of providing Tier 2 services to ease the inappropriate pressure on Tier 3 provision. The roles of four primary

mental health link worker posts have been redefined. Clear plans are in place for these posts to offer consultation and advice to the emotional health and well-being workers delivering Tier 1 and Tier 2 services, and training to develop capacity within these tiers. The primary mental health link workers will also provide a link between specialist CAMHS and lower tiers.

Good progress is being made towards a comprehensive CAMHS service. Access for those aged 16–17 years is now fully in place and protocols exist for partnership working between agencies for children and young people with complex, persistent and severe behavioural problems. Performance indicators for waiting times within CAMHS and the substance misuse services show good performance.

### **Areas for development**

- Improve the rate of annual dental and health assessments for looked after children and young people, particularly those in residential care. Ensure that provision for these assessments is more accessible and more appropriate to the needs of children and young people.
- Reduce the delays in the provision of services, equipment and adaptations to children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities with less complex needs.

### **Staying safe**

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The LSCB has broad membership and is working very effectively. It is having a positive impact on the wider safeguarding agenda as well as child protection processes. For example, an allegations management sub-group has been established and safer recruitment processes are being agreed across all agencies to ensure consistency across statutory and voluntary agencies. Rigorous performance management processes are in place for the LSCB and it responds appropriately to local and national issues.

The number of referrals of children in need is low compared to statistical neighbours and national averages. This is partly explained by the way referrals are counted with low level referrals not being included in this figure but being defined as contacts. Consequently data shows a high proportion of referrals triggering an initial assessment.

All children and young people on the child protection register and all who are looked after are allocated a qualified social worker. All child protection review conferences, and a good proportion of statutory reviews of looked after children and young people, are held within required timescales.

Regular monitoring and reviewing of thresholds for access to children's social care is conducted by managers, including comparison of thresholds between different areas of the county, to ensure that the thresholds are at an appropriate level and that there is equality of access to services.

Although numbers of children and young people on the child protection register are comparatively low, there has been a significant increase in the past year. The number of initial child protection conferences taking place within 15 days has declined and is now below national and statistical neighbour averages.

Most young people feel very safe in the county. Work is progressing steadily on the Somerset Anti-Bullying Strategy, with good attention being paid to the needs of vulnerable groups, such as Travellers and those from Black and minority ethnic communities.

A wide range of advice and support is given to children and families regarding physical safety. Although deaths and serious injuries from road traffic accidents are reducing year on year, the council is not complacent and is appropriately targeting high risk issues such as teenage driving.

The creation of locally based, multi-agency teams and the establishment of children's centres are enabling good work on the provision of preventative services.

Appropriate procedures and protocols are in place to track missing children.

There is a lower proportion of looked after children and young people in Somerset than in comparator authorities or nationally. A higher proportion of such children and young people are in residential care and fewer are placed in kinship care. A five-year plan is being implemented to ensure that in-house residential provision matches assessed need and that opportunities to increase foster carer recruitment are maximised. The numbers of children and young people subject to moves of placements are higher than comparator authorities. However, this is explained by good performance in adoption and some planned moves for a number of children and young people in order to ensure appropriate placement provision.

The rate for the completion of initial assessments within timescale is now adequate, having declined to 62.3%. The reasons for this decline are unclear despite comprehensive performance management systems within children's social care.

One recommendation emerged from the JAR.

### **For immediate action**

- Ensure that all social care case files meet accepted standards of recording and include the underlying reasons for the actions taken as well as the decisions taken as a result of management oversight and review.

The council has embedded performance management systems to ensure that files meet accepted standards of recording and that management oversight is demonstrated on files. Managers at all levels undertake regular file audits. The council is implementing a new case management system in October 2007 in line with requirements, which incorporates planning for increased opportunities for detailed oversight of files and management audit.

### **Areas for development**

- Improve the completion rate for initial assessments within the required timescale.
- Improve the rate of initial child protection conferences taking place within 15 days of a section 47 referral.

## **Enjoying and achieving**

## **Grade 2**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The strengths of the work identified at the time of the JAR have been maintained. Good progress continues to be made in establishing children's centres which play an important role in supporting the most vulnerable children. The council uses good data to target resources effectively to identified priorities. There is, rightly, a sharp focus on improving the achievements of children and young people. Standards overall in national tests and examinations remain adequate. The council is resolute about tackling underachievement. Improved processes for monitoring the effectiveness of schools and more robust challenge and support have had a positive impact on halting a declining position. Good improvements have been made to the outcomes for children and young people who are looked after and the council's monitoring demonstrates the good impact of a range of appropriate, well targeted interventions on the achievements of children and young people in individual primary and secondary schools. Two recommendations emerged from the JAR.

### **For immediate action**

- Ensure that behaviour support services provide an appropriate balance of peripatetic and withdrawal support and that there are effective management arrangements, including robust performance management.

### **For action in the next six months**

- Ensure that schools with Foundation Stage provision are provided with well targeted monitoring, challenge and support for their teaching and learning strategies.

The council's response to improving behaviour support services has been good. A behaviour strategy board, established in January 2007, has broad representation across relevant services and schools. It directs the work of senior officers and clear lines of accountability have been established. The recently appointed behaviour strategy co-ordinator is effectively driving initiatives forward. Effective communications have secured improving behaviour and attendance as a priority for schools with local collaborative partnerships working to agreed and financed plans. Support to schools in managing behaviour is being improved through a systematic approach to extending the work of the social, emotional and behaviour support service, particularly within the pupil referral service and training and support for initiatives, such as restorative justice. Appropriate steps to expand alternative provision for children and young people experiencing difficulties in mainstream schools are being taken and there is a clear recognition of the need to monitor closely the availability of places. The strategic approach being taken encompasses a wider range of good initiatives. For example, in children's centres, work developing children's communication and social skills is being extended to secure early identification of children with behaviour and learning difficulties. There was a significant decrease in days lost to fixed-term exclusions in 2006-07, but a significant rise in the number of children and young people being permanently excluded from primary schools. An analysis has identified patterns in the latter that are being addressed through appropriate and targeted interventions.

A strategic approach to improving outcomes for all children in the Foundation Stage encompasses provision in schools. Good progress is being made in implementing an appropriate range of actions to improve the quality of Foundation Stage provision in schools. Strategies combine comprehensive approaches to improving provision in all settings with targeted support to individual settings. A strong feature is the thorough training for Foundation Stage coordinators.

### **Areas for development**

- Improve the rate by which children and young people make progress with their learning and raise standards of attainment.
- Reduce the proportion of children and young people being permanently excluded from primary schools.

## **Making a positive contribution**

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The strengths of the work identified at the time of the JAR remain. No recommendations emerged from the JAR.

Opportunities for children and young people to express their views and to influence the development of services are good. The council regularly seeks the views of children and young people and their participation, for example, in consultations on

the provision of health services and contributions to the appointments of senior and other officers is good.

Children and young people are supported well in developing socially and emotionally. The youth service is outstanding and is particularly effective in supporting vulnerable young people with low self-esteem and difficulties with anger management.

Advocacy is offered to all children and young people over 10 years of age who are subject to child protection conferences. Despite the positive promotion of looked after children and young people contributing to their statutory reviews, participation levels have dropped slightly. Independent reviewing officers continue to encourage better preparation of children and young people for the review process and to seek to hold such reviews in user-friendly circumstances. Views of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are sought in appropriate ways and enable those with communication difficulties to participate fully.

A high proportion of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities continue to have a transition plan and there has been a significant increase in direct payments.

Numbers entering the youth justice system for the first time are generally in line with statistical neighbours and performance in preventing re-offending is slightly better than national averages. However, the proportion of looked after children and young people who are over 10 years of age and in receipt of final warnings or reprimands is almost double that of comparators and national averages. The council has rightly identified this as a priority issue to address.

### **Areas for development**

- Increase the proportion of looked after children and young people who participate in their statutory reviews.
- Reduce the proportion of looked after children and young people over 10 years of age who are in receipt of final warnings or reprimands.

## **Achieving economic well-being**

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The partnership between the council, the Learning and Skills Council and Connexions is strong and effective. Progress against the targets and actions in the 14–19 development plan is regularly reviewed and priorities and activities appropriately revised. Educational achievement for young people by the age of 19 is good and the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training is low. The council is determined in its drive to reach vulnerable young people and is implementing a range of strategies to address identified priorities. The council and its partners are very aware of the need to secure young people's entitlement across the county with particular challenges arising from

those who live in communities in isolated rural areas. Two recommendations emerged from the JAR.

### **For action in the next six months**

- Ensure all secondary schools provide satisfactory and impartial careers education and guidance that meets statutory requirements.
- Ensure that all young people have access to an appropriate range of vocational qualifications at Key Stage 4.

The council has responded positively to the issues identified by the JAR. A good range of strategies is addressing the need to ensure that all secondary schools provide satisfactory and impartial careers education and guidance that meets statutory requirements. To further this work an advanced skills teacher in careers education is being deployed for three days a week from September 2007. This increase in provision is partly funded by Connexions. Clear actions are being taken to support individual middle and secondary schools. A range of activities at county level including skills exhibitions, theatre presentations and the soon to be launched area prospectus enhance provision through the advice and guidance they offer to all young people. Consultations with young people are good with their views shaping developments.

There is a well defined area structure to support collaborative arrangements for 14–19 developments and these have provided a framework for strengthening the commitment and involvement of secondary schools. The positive response to nine submissions for diplomas was as a result of improved collaborative working. The sound strategy for ensuring young people have access to an appropriate range of vocational qualifications at Key Stage 4 rests partly in the work of the these local partnerships and direct engagement with individual schools through the council's monitoring and support work. However, with aspects of this work at the early stages of development, it is too early to judge the impact. The council has good processes for monitoring the progress of these initiatives.

### **Area for development**

- Build on the achievements of local collaborative partnerships to ensure that all young people between the ages of 14 and 19, and particularly those in secondary schools, have access to an appropriate range of vocational qualifications.

## **Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people**

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is good as is its management of these services. The council has effective partnerships with clearly stated, shared ambitions. Good progress in establishing multi agency locally



based teams reflects the council's strong commitment to providing more coherent services for children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable. Senior leadership is good and strong processes for improving services are well established. These include thorough assessment of needs, careful targeting of resources to priorities and effective performance management.

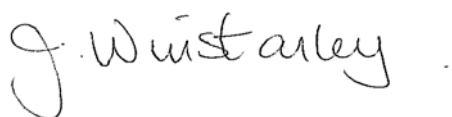
The council is not complacent and is fully aware of current challenges. Outcomes for children and young people are closely monitored, including those from Black and minority ethnic groups, and increasingly coherent services are being provided. The council knows, however, that there is more to do. For example, gains in the number of looked after young people who attain five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C are welcome, but there is recognition that there is still much to do to improve outcomes further for these young people, including improving annual dental and health assessments and reducing the number who are over 10 years of age in receipt of final warnings or reprimands. Within education the key challenge is to secure a more rapid pace of improvement in the achievements of children and young people.

No recommendations emerged from the JAR. However, the council identified priorities in the ensuing action plan, arising from the report, to support its work. These include the establishment of the multi-agency teams and improving communication and joint working with children and young people, schools and other agencies. There are good examples to demonstrate the positive response the council is making to address these issues.

Overall the council has demonstrated good progress in meeting the JAR recommendations and has shown good capacity to maintain and improve further its services for children and young people.

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