



Joint area review

Somerset

Children's Services Authority Area

Review of services for children and young people

Adult Learning Inspectorate
Audit Commission
Commission for Social Care Inspection
Healthcare Commission
HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate
HM Inspectorate of Constabulary
HM Inspectorate of Court Administration
HM Inspectorate of Prisons
HM Inspectorate of Probation
Ofsted

Audience	Published	Reference no.
All	13 March 2007	933



© Crown copyright 2007

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the local authority or at www.ofsted.gov.uk

Contents

Introduction	2
Context	3
Summary report	4
Grades	9
Recommendations	9
Main report	11
Outcomes for children and young people	11
The impact of local services	12
Being healthy	12
Staying safe	14
Enjoying and achieving	17
Making a positive contribution	19
Achieving economic well-being	21
Service management	23
Annex: The children and young people's section of the corporate assessment report	26

Introduction

1. This joint area review was conducted using the arrangements required under Section 20 of the Children Act 2004. It was carried out by a multi-disciplinary team of ten inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), the Healthcare Commission (HC), the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the Audit Commission. The review was undertaken according to the requirements of the *Framework for the inspection of children's services*.

2. The review was linked to the contemporaneous corporate assessment of the local council by the Audit Commission and its findings are represented in the relevant part of the corporate assessment report. An inspection of the local authority's youth service took place alongside the review and its findings formed part of the evidence base for its judgements.

3. The review describes the outcomes achieved by children and young people growing up in Somerset and evaluates the way local services, taken together, contribute to their well-being. Joint area reviews focus on the extent to which children and young people are healthy, safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and are well prepared to secure economic well-being.

4. The review evaluates the collective contribution made to each outcome for children and young people by relevant services in the area. It also judges the contributions made by the council's services overall and, specifically, its education and children's social care services. Particular attention is given to joint action by local services on behalf of those groups of children and young people who are vulnerable to poor outcomes. Two such groups are covered in detail: children and young people who are looked after by the council; and children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

5. The review took place in two stages consisting in total of three weeks over a five-week period. The first stage reviewed all existing evidence including:

- self-assessment undertaken by local public service providers
- a survey of children and young people's views
- performance data
- planning documents
- information from the inspection of local settings and services, such as schools and day-care provision
- evidence gathered during the earlier Youth Offending Team inspection
- briefings from staff within inspectorates, commissions and other public bodies in contact with local providers
- a review of case files for children and young people receiving support from a number of local agencies.

6. The second stage included inspection fieldwork. This included studies of how far local services have improved outcomes for a small sample of children and young people, some of whom have the most complex needs, and a study of provision in two neighbourhoods: the Keyford area of Frome and Glastonbury and its surrounding area. It also included gathering evidence on 10 key judgements, selected because of their critical importance to improving outcomes for children and young people in the local area. This included discussions with elected members of the local authority and their equivalents in other public agencies, officers from these agencies, service users, and community representatives.

Context

7. The County of Somerset covers an area of 3,452 square kilometres. It is relatively sparsely populated, particularly in its western part, with few urban centres. Whilst there are significant areas of both rural and urban deprivation, the county overall has lower levels of deprivation than the national average. There are 110,000 children aged under 18. At any point in time, about 3,500 children are assessed as being in need, 390 children are looked after by the local authority, and 170 are on the child protection register. The black and minority ethnic population is relatively small at less than 4% of the school population, but is increasing. There are 283 schools, including 223 primary schools, nine middle schools, 30 secondary schools, eight special schools and 13 pupil referral units, of which five are medical tuition centres. There are approximately 260 foster carer households, which care for 80% of the children looked after by the local authority, and eight children's residential centres. There are also 16 children's centres, with a further 17 scheduled to open by March 2008.

8. The Somerset Children and Young People's Partnership (SCYPP) was established in July 2005. In April 2005, all the local authority's children's services were brought together in a single Children and Young People's Directorate. The local authority's lead member for children's services chairs the SCYPP. Membership of the SCYPP board includes chief executives and directors of key partner agencies, such as the National Health Service, Connexions, the local Learning and Skills Council, district councils, the Youth Offending Team and the voluntary and community sector, as well as key senior officers from the county council, and representatives from schools, further education colleges and the police.

9. The Dorset and Somerset Learning and Skills Council, the local authority, Connexions, colleges, training providers and schools are partners in addressing the 14-19 strategy. Post-16 education and training is provided by four further education/tertiary colleges, eight school sixth forms and one sixth form college, seven county-based work-based learning providers and some national training providers. Entry to Employment provision is managed by Somerset County Training which subcontracts with four providers. There are approximately 110 learners on this programme. Adult and community learning, including family

learning, is provided by the local authority. There are four specialist colleges for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

10. From October 2006, the four primary care trusts in Somerset merged into one organisation, Somerset PCT, which now commissions most health services for the local population. Acute health services for children and young people are provided mainly by the Taunton and Somerset National Health Service (NHS) Trust and the Yeovil District Hospital NHS Foundation Trust. Some services are provided by the Royal United Hospital Bath NHS Trust. More specialist services are provided at hospital provision in Bristol. The Somerset Partnership NHS and Social Care Trust is the main provider of mental health services and substance misuse services. The South Western Ambulance Service NHS Trust provides ambulance services and manages out of hours primary care services. The South West Strategic Health Authority is responsible for performance management of most of the health services in the area.

11. There are no young offender institutions in the area.

Summary Report

Outcomes for children and young people

12. Outcomes for children and young people in Somerset are good overall. Most health indicators compare well with national averages, with the teenage pregnancy rate being well below average. Children and young people appear to be comparatively safe. The proportion of children on the child protection register and those looked after is low. The great majority of looked after children are placed within the local area and placements are more stable than the average elsewhere. Rates of adoption are very good. Children and young people achieve adequately up to age 16. Pupil test and examination results in 2006 were broadly in line with both the statistical neighbour and national averages. However, educational achievement for those aged 16-18 compares well with the average for the rest of the country. School attendance and exclusion levels are in line with those found in similar areas. Comparatively few children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are educated in special schools. Children and young people have a good range of opportunities to contribute their views on service provision and to participate in key decision making processes. There is insufficient affordable housing generally, but provision for the most vulnerable groups is comparatively good. The proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training at age 19 is better than average; for young offenders, the proportion is average.

The impact of local services

13. The impact of local services in improving outcomes for children and young people is good. The local authority's youth service is outstanding.

Being healthy

14. **The combined work of local services in securing the health of children and young people is good.** Parents and carers are provided with timely and good quality advice and support. Additional, well-targeted support is provided to teenage parents and other vulnerable groups. The promotion of healthy lifestyles by schools is good and they are well supported in this by specialist local authority and health service staff. There is a very effective partnership approach to the provision of information, education and advice on sexual health and relationships. Good steps are taken to ask young people for their views in this and other respects, and these views influence service delivery. Provision to address substance abuse is good. Referral of, and specialist treatment for, children's health needs are both appropriate and timely. Hospital services provide both good emergency care and 'child and parent friendly' provision more generally. There are well developed outreach services for children and young people with disability, chronic health needs and life threatening conditions. Health service provision within schools is good overall. The contribution of school, youth service and other provision to promoting the emotional health of children and young people is good. However, inadequacies in more specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have been a long-standing problem. A significant expansion of such provision has now been agreed and some staff have already been appointed. However, referral pathways to the new service and the criteria for access to more specialist CAMH service teams are, as yet, insufficiently clear. Provision to meet the health needs of looked after children is good.

Staying safe

15. **The work of all local services in keeping children and young people safe is good.** There is a single contact point for concerns about children and young people's welfare; calls are dealt with consistently and appropriately. Cases needing further investigation by area social work teams are passed on swiftly. The Somerset Local Safeguarding Children Board (SLSCB) is working effectively. Multi-agency child protection policies and procedures are robust. Thresholds for the involvement of the different services concerned are appropriate and consistently interpreted. Child protection key worker roles are well understood and carried out effectively across all agencies. However, hospitals do not routinely check the child protection register when children and young people are admitted direct to wards. Multi-agency child protection training is of good quality and management oversight of social work practice is effective. However, this oversight and the decisions that follow are not adequately recorded on many case files. All staff newly appointed to public agencies receive appropriate Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and identity checks. There are robust processes to track children known to be missing from education and/or home.

16. Good information and advice is made available to children and young people and their families regarding safety issues. Children and young people generally report that Somerset is a safe place to be, both within their schools and elsewhere. There are well-established processes to plan and deliver packages of care for children at risk of becoming looked after. The adoption and fostering services are good and foster carers value the support provided to them. Children and young people who are looked after feel well supported by their carers. The local authority's direct payments scheme to carers of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has enabled some innovative support arrangements to be put in place. There is adequate provision of respite care in both residential and family placements.

Enjoying and achieving

17. **The work of all local services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and recreation and to achieve well is good.** Sufficient and accessible early years education and day-care provision is made and its quality is similar to that in other areas. Good progress has also been made in opening a network of children's centres across the county. The weakest area of early years education is within the Foundation Stage in schools. Monitoring, challenge and support for schools generally has improved significantly within the last two years. The local authority has responded decisively and effectively to a hitherto declining position, managing this substantial shift in its approach without alienating schools. Support for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is outstanding. Comparatively few children and young people are placed in special schools and the role of these schools in supporting provision in mainstream schools has been developed to good effect. Resource allocation systems to meet pupils' additional needs are efficient. Local authority support for the management of behaviour in schools, particularly for secondary aged pupils, is a weakness. Management of the behaviour support service is ineffective and performance monitoring, in particular, is poor. There is good provision for young people unable to attend school and for other potentially vulnerable groups, such as looked after children. There is a good range of recreational and voluntary learning opportunities across the county. The outstanding youth service makes a major contribution.

Making a positive contribution

18. **The overall contribution of services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good.** Opportunities for children and young people to express their views and to influence the development of services are good. They have materially influenced the development of provision and service practice in a number of respects. Children and young people are well supported in developing socially and emotionally, and the youth service is particularly strong in such respects. There is good support and encouragement for children and young people to participate in and, in many cases, run voluntary activities. Good steps are taken to support individual

children and young people in contributing to the planning and review of provision made for them. Children and young people facing major changes or challenges in their lives are well supported. Action to reduce antisocial behaviour and offending by children and young people is good. The approach taken by the police at a local level to building relationships based on trust and respect with children and young people has made a major contribution to this. The Youth Offending Team, too, makes a major contribution. Help for looked after children and young people to contribute to society is satisfactory overall but with a weakness in the area of offending behaviour. The Promise Mentor scheme provides much valued personal and, where necessary, advocacy support. Effective action has been taken to obtain the views of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to inform the development of the local authority's special educational needs strategy.

Achieving economic well-being

19. The work of all local services to help children and young people achieve economic well-being is good. Young people are generally well prepared for working life and there is a good range of work-related learning activity. The Connexions service provides good and impartial information, advice and guidance to all pupils. It also provides valuable additional support to those with particular needs. However, careers education and guidance in a small minority of secondary schools is inadequate. Significant progress has been made over the last couple of years in establishing and implementing a coherent strategy for 14-19 education and training. This is largely the result of the leadership of the local authority and the Learning and Skills Council. Provision for pupils aged 14-16 has improved significantly and there is good collaboration between schools and further education colleges. However, a small minority of secondary schools does not provide adequate opportunities for vocational studies at Key Stage 4.

20. Education and training provision overall for those aged 16-19 is good: there is a wide choice of options and the quality of provision is mainly outstanding or good. However, most of the eight schools with sixth forms offer only a narrow, largely academic, curriculum and access to further education colleges for some young people in the areas concerned can be difficult. Opportunities for work-based learning are limited in some parts of the county, although success rates are good. Support to reduce the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training is good; this includes an effective project targeted at care leavers. Provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities post-16 is satisfactory and improving. The provision of accessible childcare is good. Insufficient affordable housing is available for young people and for families with children: within this context, however, successful measures are taken to meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

Service management

21. **The management of services for children and young people is good.** The shared ambitions of the local authority and its partners are challenging and clearly stated in key planning documents. Local needs and the strengths and weaknesses of existing services are assessed effectively and ambitions are well-informed accordingly. Assessment processes include good consultation with stakeholders. Leadership at senior officer and elected member level within the local authority is very good, as it is in partner agencies like the police and health service. There is an effective local strategic partnership, with a strong commitment to collaboration, which is reflected in work on the ground as well as at strategic level. One weakness is in the documentation of decisions; many key documents fail to capture the underlying rationale for the choices made.

22. The capacity of the council and its partners to deliver better outcomes for children and young people is good. The strong leadership at senior officer and elected member level is accompanied by an excellent working knowledge of local needs and the detail of service delivery. Working relationships between officers and elected members are productive. Effective steps are being taken to build capacity within the voluntary and community sector. Resource allocation is closely linked to priorities, financial management is strong, and good value for money is provided. Good progress is being made in establishing the Common Assessment Framework and Integrated Children's System locally. Workforce planning and development is good and clearly linked to the delivery of service needs and development priorities. Performance management is good. Effective use is made of a good range of information sources on service quality. Services have a good capacity to improve.

Grades

Grades awarded:

4: outstanding; 3: good; 2: adequate; 1: inadequate

	Local services overall	Council services	Health services
Being healthy	3		
Staying safe	3		
Enjoying and achieving	3		
Making a positive contribution	3		
Achieving economic well-being	3		
Service management	3		
Capacity to improve	3	3	
Children's services		3	
The education service		3	
The social care services for children		3	
The health service for children			3

Recommendations

For immediate action

- To improve access for children and young people to an appropriate level of CAMHS support, the Joint Commissioning Group for CAMHS should:

- 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.
- To improve record keeping on social care case files, the local authority should:
 - ensure that all 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.
- To improve the management of poor behaviour, particularly in secondary schools, the local authority should:
 - ensure that its behaviour support services provide an appropriate balance of peripatetic and withdrawal support and that there are effective management arrangements, including robust performance monitoring.

For action in the next six months

- To improve the provision of impartial information, advice and guidance for young people about choices post-16, the local authority should:
 - ensure that all secondary schools provide satisfactory and impartial careers education and guidance that meets statutory requirements.
- To improve the educational offer at Key Stage 4, the local authority should:
 - ensure that all young people have access to an appropriate range of vocational qualifications at Key Stage 4.
- To improve outcomes at the end of the Foundation Stage, the local authority should:
 - ensure that schools are provided with well targeted monitoring, challenge, and support for their teaching and learning strategies.

Main Report

Outcomes for children and young people

23. **Children and young people are generally healthy.** There are no marked inequalities in health between the different areas of the county. The great majority of children and young people feel at least quite healthy, with a rather higher proportion than the national average saying they feel very healthy. Rates of breastfeeding are higher than those found nationally and rates of expectation mothers who smoke during pregnancy are lower. The percentage of babies with low birth weight is low. There are comparatively low rates of childhood illness and oral health is good. The teenage pregnancy rate is low. More young people than hitherto are presenting to services with sexually transmitted infections and substance misuse problems.

24. **Children and young people appear safe.** The great majority of young people feel reasonably safe, both at school and in their local area. The proportion of children on the child protection register and those looked after is comparatively low, although increasing. However, cases which might be dealt with under formal child protection procedures elsewhere are dealt with through other, albeit properly robust, procedures in Somerset. The great majority of looked after children are placed within the local area and placements are more stable than the average elsewhere. However, longer-term stability for children placed in residential care is more variable. Rates of adoption for looked after children are very good. There has been a recent reduction in the number of serious injuries and deaths of children and young people in road traffic accidents.

25. **Children and young people achieve adequately.** Pupil test and examination results in 2006 were broadly in line with both the statistical neighbour and national averages at Key Stages 1 and 2. For a number of years up to 2005, the rates of change had compared unfavourably to the national averages; however, in 2006, the rate of change was significantly better than nationally. Comparisons for Key Stage 3 results for 2006 are not yet available; in 2005, they were mostly broadly in line with the statistical neighbour and national averages, but with a lower rate of improvement over recent years than nationally. At Key Stage 4 in 2006, examination results were broadly in line with the statistical neighbour and national averages. However, the rate of change continued the pattern of recent years with a notably lower rate of improvement than nationally in the numbers of pupils achieving five or more grades A*-C at GCSE. In 2005, the educational attainment of children looked after by the authority was generally in line with the national picture. However, in 2006, there was a significant improvement, with the percentages of those sitting at least one GCSE and those attaining at least one GCSE grade A*-G approximately doubling. School attendance levels are similar to those found in authorities which are statistical neighbours, with broadly similar rates of change. Permanent exclusion rates are in line with statistical neighbours in the primary sector but below the secondary phase. They have recently reduced in

the primary sector but gone up slightly in secondary schools, against the national trends. Comparatively few children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are educated in special schools.

26. Children and young people have a good range of opportunities to contribute their views on service provision and to participate in key decision making processes. They have influenced the development and delivery of services in a number of significant ways. Many young people are involved in voluntary activities, including fundraising for charity and the improvement of the environment. The number of young people becoming young offenders for the first time decreased a little in the most recent three-month period, although there have been major fluctuations in this figure over the last year. The proportion of young people who offend who participate in education, training and employment is broadly in line with the average for similar areas, but this figure, too, has fluctuated significantly. The proportion of young people supervised by the Youth Offending Team who have re-offended is slightly higher than the national average.

27. Children and young people are able to achieve economic well-being and are prepared well for working life. The great majority of 16-18 year olds are in full-time education, albeit less so in the most rurally isolated areas than elsewhere. Educational achievement for those aged 16-18 compares well with the average for the rest of the country. In the colleges of further education, where the great majority of young people study, success rates are above national averages at levels one, two and three. The take-up of apprenticeships is low, but success rates are good. The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training is amongst the lowest in the country. Young people do not have sufficient affordable housing available to them although provision for the most vulnerable groups is comparatively good. The proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training at age 19 is better than average.

The impact of local services

Being healthy

28. The combined work of local services in securing the health of children and young people is good. Parents and carers are provided with timely and good quality advice and support by general practitioners and other primary healthcare staff, by hospitals and, increasingly, through children's centres. They are also encouraged to be involved in many of the health education projects run within schools. Additional, well-targeted support is provided to teenage parents and other vulnerable groups to help them ensure their children's good health. These parents are encouraged to share their experiences, to develop self-help skills, and to have high aspirations for their children.

29. The promotion of healthy lifestyles by schools is good and they are well supported in this by specialist local authority and health service staff. Healthier eating and increased physical exercise are key elements of the programmes involved. Promotional work is allied to measures to improve both the opportunities for physical activity and the quality and take-up of school meals. Schools are playing a major part in this by offering a range of after school clubs and making their facilities available for wider community use. School transport plans promote walking and cycling. The Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership is a very effective partner with schools in increasing the opportunities for physical exercise.

30. There is a very effective partnership approach to the provision of information, education and advice on sexual health and relationships. The particular needs of young people in rural areas for access to confidential and friendly services are well understood and addressed. Good steps are taken to ask young people for their views about this and other aspects of health provision and these views influence the provision made. For example, a presentation by young people on the barriers they can experience in taking up provision is used in the training of clinic staff. The Respect initiative provides a consistently good standard of contraceptive and sexual health services. Whilst more young people with sexually transmitted infections are presenting to services this is at least as much to do with a better identification of infection and a greater willingness of young people to come forward than evidence of an increasing problem.

31. Provision to address substance misuse is good and also based on effective partnership working. The Substance Misuse Screening Tool is used well, particularly by those working with more vulnerable young people. Access to specialist advice and treatment for substance abusers generally is good. The Youth Offending Team is able to ensure that all the young people it works with receive the assessment and treatment they need. This is a much better position than in most of the rest of the country.

32. Most general practitioners participate actively in the promotion of children's physical health, and referral for specialist assessment and treatment is both appropriate and timely. There is rapid intervention and support for problems like significant hearing loss. The hospital services at Taunton and Yeovil provide both good emergency care and 'child and parent friendly' provision more generally. They link well, in turn, with the more specialist services in Bristol.

33. There are well developed outreach services for children and young people with disabilities, chronic health needs and life threatening conditions. Parents and carers of children and young people with the most severe and complex needs receive excellent support from a service provided through a contract with Barnardos. Adaptations to carers' homes are undertaken as necessary and specialist equipment is provided. However, there can be delay in agreeing and delivering coordinated support packages and a few hospital stays have been

unnecessarily long as a result. For children and young people with less severe needs, the support service is not as good and there can be undue delays in the provision of adaptations and specialist equipment. However, this is principally due to resource restrictions and mirrors the national picture. Specialist health service provision within schools to meet the needs of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good overall.

34. The general contribution of school, youth service and other provision to promoting the emotional health of children and young people is good. However, inadequacies in more specialist CAMHS have been a long-standing problem. Whilst provision for young people who offend and for looked after children and young people has been made a priority and is adequate, support for other groups of vulnerable young people is not. This includes young people who are excluded from school, or whose behaviour puts them at serious risk of this, and those not in education, employment or training. Specialist community CAMHS teams struggle to meet demand because provision at the level below is insufficient. A major expansion of the latter provision has now been agreed, to be funded jointly by the local authority and the health service and 13 additional community mental health worker posts will be created. Appointments have recently been made to four of these posts, to be part of the new locality teams; the remainder will follow by April 2008. Greater clarity is still required, however, about referral pathways to the new service and the criteria for access to specialist CAMHS teams.

35. Provision to meet the health needs of looked after children is good. They receive appropriate health assessment and are registered as necessary with doctors and dentists. They also receive appropriate information and support in accessing sexual health services. The work of the designated nurse for looked after children is particularly highly regarded.

Staying safe

36. **The work of all local services in keeping children and young people safe is good.** The SLSCB has a wide membership and is working effectively, with clear development priorities. Performance monitoring arrangements at Board level are rigorous and the one serious case review in the last three years was responded to appropriately. Child protection policies and procedures are robust and are the product of good multi-agency cooperation. Thresholds for the involvement of the different services concerned are appropriate and consistently interpreted. Child protection key worker roles are well understood and carried out across all agencies. Hospitals have direct access to the child protection register and, commendably, routinely check the register when children and young people are seen in accident and emergency departments. However, they do not do so when children and young people are admitted directly to wards. This is an inconsistency in local practice which is currently being addressed by the SLSCB. Multi-agency child protection training is of good quality and regularly refreshed for key workers. Training and other

guidance includes good coverage of the particular needs of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

37. Somerset Direct, a multi-purpose call centre, has recently been established county-wide and is the single contact point for concerns about children and young people's welfare. It includes a social work team that deals directly with children's social care referrals. Such calls are dealt with consistently and appropriately. Cases needing further investigation by area social work teams are passed on swiftly and this ensures that best use is made of their time. These new arrangements were sensibly introduced on a pilot basis initially, prior to full implementation. However, this has meant that improvements in the consistency of response have only very recently been delivered in some areas.

38. All child protection cases are allocated to a qualified social worker. Management oversight of social work practice is effective and includes regular supervision, performance data analysis and file audits. However this oversight and the decisions that follow are not adequately recorded on many case files. This is a weakness and accepted as such. However, management has shown the capacity to move swiftly and effectively to rectify such faults and action was in hand before the inspection team left site. Independent reviewing officers provide consistent chairing of child protection conferences, all of which take place within required timescales. Parents and young people over the age of 10 are encouraged and well supported in attending child protection conferences and review meetings. Social care staff have good training and personal development opportunities.

39. All staff newly appointed to public agencies receive appropriate CRB and identity checks. The standard of checking is above statutory requirements and commendably includes all volunteers working in schools and youth service provision. The support and guidance offered to schools and other service settings in such respects is good. However, personnel files within the local authority are not standardised and information can be difficult to locate. This issue is currently being addressed, as is the need to establish a robust and consistently applied policy for regular re-checking of those employed for several years.

40. There are robust processes to track children known to be missing from education. Advice to schools on the circumstances where children and young people may safely be removed from roll has one flaw, in that they are advised that a parent's statement alone is sufficient evidence of a move to another school. However, the way the great majority of schools act in practice is more secure, as they wait until the receiving school has confirmed the move. There are excellent procedures, led by the police, for tracking children and young people who are missing from home.

41. Good information and advice is made available to children and young people and their families regarding safety issues. For example, pupils are advised of the identity and role of their school's child protection designated teacher. Agencies work well together to provide information, advice and support to families who suffer domestic violence. A Safeguarding Children in Sport and Leisure group has devised minimum operating standards for groups hiring district council and leisure trust premises to ensure that each hiring group has a named child protection officer and undertakes appropriate CRB checks. The Somerset Child-Safe Partnership provides child protection advice, guidance and sample policies to voluntary bodies engaged in sport and community activities.

42. Children and young people generally report that Somerset is a safe place to be, both within their schools and elsewhere. There is a robust system for reporting incidents of racial or personal abuse in schools and the returns are monitored at senior level within the local authority. However, the safety of roads is a high profile issue in some areas. Some recent progress has been made in reducing serious injuries and deaths of children and young people in road traffic accidents. There are clear council health and safety policies and advice for schools and others running outdoor activities.

43. There are well-established processes to plan and deliver packages of family support for children at risk of becoming looked after. Some of this support is very good, although the quality and quantity is variable overall. There is a robust process for deciding whether to accommodate children and young people. This has a strong and commendable emphasis on diversion from such action. The support provided is often successful in dealing with crisis situations, with the result that the number of looked after children is comparatively low.

44. The adoption and fostering services are good and foster carers value the support provided to them. The range of placement options is adequate. However, the recruitment and training of carers does not always succeed in ensuring a close match between the supply of placements and individual young people's needs. There are, however, effective arrangements to ensure that best use is made of the placements that are currently available. Children and young people who are looked after feel well supported by their carers. Somerset has retained significant residential home capacity, which has ensured that it is able to meet the need for placements within the county. A small number of children are in high cost agency placements, all of which are properly risk assessed and closely monitored. The local authority ensures that children placed by other local authorities in residential accommodation locally, of whom the numbers are high, are adequately safeguarded.

45. The local authority's direct payments scheme to carers of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has enabled some innovative support arrangements to be put in place. There is adequate provision of respite care in both residential and family placements, and plans

are well advanced to develop more family outreach and support services. Parents and carers are well supported by the Somerset Supporters scheme, which resulted from a consultation exercise three years ago.

Enjoying and achieving

46. **The work of all local services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and recreation and to achieve well is good overall.** The provision of early years education and care is good. Very effective partnership working between the public, private and voluntary sectors has secured a sufficient supply of places with reasonable accessibility at the local level. A comparatively high proportion of new provision is judged at initial registration to need improvement to meet the required standards; this mainly relates to the equipment provided. The local authority is rightly reviewing the way it advises providers in order to address this problem. Inspections after initial registration show that the quality of provision is broadly in line with the average elsewhere in the country. Monitoring and support from the local authority is much appreciated. Good progress has also been made in opening a network of children's centres across the county. Choices of location for these centres are well informed by health and social needs data.

47. The weakest area of early years education is foundation stage provision within schools. At the end of this stage, children achieve significantly less well than in areas with similar populations. The local authority has rightly identified that a key priority within its overall improvement work with early years education providers is to ensure that provision in school reception classes properly reflects current thinking on appropriate teaching and learning strategies for the age group. Similarly, it is seeking to embed the understanding that key elements of these strategies should continue into Key Stage 1 provision and beyond, as appropriate, for individual pupils. There are early signs of this having some impact, particularly in the improvement of boys' attainment.

48. Monitoring, challenge and support for schools generally has improved significantly within the last two years. Hitherto, whilst relationships with schools were amicable, there were clear indications that challenge, in particular, was weak. Standards on most measures were no better than broadly in line with those of similar areas and, in some cases, were significantly below. More importantly, however, the rate of improvement in almost all respects was worse than nationally. The local authority has responded decisively to this declining position. New staff appointments, new management structures and strong leadership from the top have begun to have a positive impact. The work of the education development service is well targeted in relation to risk, and effective use is being made of high quality data analysis to challenge and support schools. Schools are now well supported in evaluating the effectiveness of their own work, which the local authority rightly sees as an essential part of the overall improvement strategy. Governing bodies are also given good support in offering constructive challenge to headteachers.

49. The local authority has managed this substantial shift in its approach without alienating schools, although there has been, and will continue to be, inevitable discomfort for some. The high quality of the local authority's work in such respects is strongly affirmed by most headteachers. It is too soon for the new approach to have had a substantial impact on improving pupil test and exam results. However, there was an upturn in 2006 at Key Stages 1 and 2, which were amongst the local authority's earliest priorities for improvement. Inspection findings are also beginning to reflect the improvements in challenge and support. The gap between the local and national averages in terms of schools judged to be good or outstanding has narrowed, albeit modestly, in the primary sector. In the secondary sector, the position has improved very significantly, such that the proportion of schools in Somerset being judged as good or outstanding is now above the national average. The proportion of schools giving major concern has significantly reduced and only two schools have required special measures in the last year. None has been given a notice to improve.

50. Support for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is outstanding. There is a very effective multi-agency group, which identifies very young children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and coordinates provision. Comparatively low use is made of statutory assessment and those undertaken are efficiently carried out. Additional resources for most children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are provided to schools using a less costly and time-consuming approach to assessing need. This approach is supported by most schools and parents. Good account has been taken of the possible consequences of the county's distinctive approach for young people moving to and from other local authority areas. Comparatively low use is also made of special school provision and numbers on roll have reduced over recent years. The opportunity has been taken to develop the role of special schools in supporting provision in mainstream schools. The strategy for this is sensitive to the different needs and circumstances of local areas and is supported by the great majority of schools. The progress of children with special needs is very well monitored; this includes some excellent use of specially designed performance measures like P-scales.

51. Measures taken to improve school attendance are satisfactory but support for the management of behaviour in schools is a weakness. The behaviour support service is poorly managed and not well regarded by schools. Performance monitoring, in particular, is poor. Opportunities for part-time and/or temporary withdrawal of pupils from school are limited although funding has now been agreed to increase these possibilities significantly. There are effective systems to ensure that pupils permanently excluded from school receive appropriate full-time education within the required timescale. There is good provision for the education of pregnant schoolgirls, young mothers and children unable to attend school for medical reasons. Provision by parents who choose to educate their children at home is well supported and progress and outcomes monitored.

52. Support for the specific learning needs of other potentially vulnerable groups is good overall. Guidance on writing personal education plans for looked after children is good, as is the support provided and the monitoring of progress, and there have been recent improvements in both attendance and educational achievement. Effective help is also given to young carers and to children and young people from Traveller communities. Parents and carers are given good support to help their children succeed at school and the new children's centres play a particularly important role in supporting the most vulnerable groups.

53. There is a good range of recreational and voluntary learning opportunities across the county. The outstanding youth service makes a major contribution in such respects. Transport is an inevitable problem for some in the more rural areas but most young people reported that access to provision is not an insuperable difficulty.

Making a positive contribution

54. **The overall contribution of services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good.** Opportunities for children and young people to express their views and to influence the development of services are good. They have materially influenced the development of provision and service practice in a number of respects. Whilst there is significant consultation activity at county level, this tends to be time limited and focused on particular issues. There is no regular pattern of meetings and young people participate on a voluntary basis, rather than representatives being drawn from the network of school and youth councils. Best advantage is hence not being taken of the strength of the local forums to achieve systematic canvassing of young people's views. More positively, there are three local members of the UK Youth Parliament, supported by an advisory group of 30 young people, and participation in the election of the MPs is high. The commitment of public services generally to the participation of children and young people in key decision making is strong and the programme of activities to secure this is extensive and growing. The need to rationalise this impressive, but largely uncoordinated, programme is well understood and is rightly a priority for early action.

55. Children and young people are well supported in developing socially and emotionally. The youth service is particularly effective in such respects. It provides valuable support in building young people's social awareness as well as their ability to make and sustain productive relationships with others. It is particularly effective in supporting vulnerable young people with low self-esteem and difficulties with anger management. The effective local forums for children and young people to express their views and participate in decision making also make a good contribution to building self-confidence and communication skills. There is similarly good support and encouragement for children and young people to participate in and, in many cases, run voluntary activities. These include charitable fundraising, mentoring support for others,

and a range of activities to improve the environment. The young people who participate benefit in terms of both leadership and team working skills.

56. Good steps are taken to support individual children and young people in contributing to the planning and review of provision made for them. For example, all young people over 10 participating in child protection conferences are offered the support of an independent advocate. Children and young people facing major changes or challenges in their lives are also well supported. This is particularly so for the most vulnerable when they move from early years provision to school and from primary to secondary school. There is also good, rapid response provision to support young people experiencing traumatic events. Support for young carers is variable across local areas and information about what is available is not getting through to everyone who might benefit. However, the range of activities is considerable and the overall quality of support is good.

57. Action to reduce antisocial behaviour and offending by children and young people is good. The approach taken by the police at a local level to building relationships based on trust and respect for children and young people has made a major contribution to this. Measures taken to intervene early when behaviour is giving cause for concern have largely been very effective. Very little use has hence had to be made of anti-social behaviour orders; there are none in Somerset at present. The Youth Offending Team, too, makes a major contribution. There is a good range of activity, well-targeted at the most vulnerable groups, which diverts young people from anti-social behaviour and crime. Effective work is undertaken to raise awareness of the effects on victims. Restorative justice work is a particular strength.

58. Work with young people with a history of offending is similarly good. Assessments of need are thorough and the take-up of support provision, such as that for drug users, is high. The contribution of different agencies to the staffing of the Youth Offending Team is good and working relationships are effective. Roles and responsibilities of managers and staff have recently been reviewed and clarified. Risk assessment and management supervision arrangements have been strengthened. Improved data collection and analysis activity are being piloted.

59. Help for looked after children and young people to contribute to society is satisfactory overall but with a weakness in the area of offending behaviour. Good measures are taken to obtain young people's views and to support their participation in the planning and review of provision. This applies to both looked after children as a group and to the involvement of individuals in key decisions affecting their future. Elected members of the local authority and senior officers commit significant amounts of time to meeting young people to obtain their views. The Promise Mentor scheme provides much valued personal support and, where necessary, advocacy to ensure that the voice of the young person is heard when key decisions are being made.

60. The proportion of looked after children who offend is comparatively high and those cared for in the local authority's residential homes are responsible for a high proportion of the offences committed. Measures to address the high offending rate have not had sustained success, although restorative justice work has recently been extended into two residential homes and this has had a positive impact. Further work to reduce the rate of offending has rightly been made a high priority.

61. Very effective action has been taken to obtain the views of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to inform the development of the local authority's special educational needs strategy. Good steps are taken to involve individuals in planning and reviewing the provision made for them and to support their participation when key decisions are being made. Transitions from early years settings to school and from school to school are generally well managed.

Achieving economic well-being

62. **The work of all local services to help children and young people achieve economic well-being is good.** Young people are generally well prepared for working life. There is a good and improving range of work-related learning activity and the great majority of young people undertake work experience during Key Stage 4. However, the quality and quantity of careers education and guidance in a small minority of secondary schools is inadequate, with some pupils not receiving their statutory requirement. This having been said, the Connexions service provides good, impartial information, advice and guidance to all pupils. The Connexions service also provides additional support for young people with particular needs, which is highly valued. The availability of educational maintenance allowances is well publicised and take-up is very high. Personal, financial and welfare support generally for 16-19 year olds is good, particularly in colleges.

63. Slow progress has been made until recently in establishing and implementing a coherent strategy for 14-19 education and training. This position has improved significantly within the last two years, largely as a result of the leadership of the local authority, supported by the Learning and Skills Council. The range of provision at Key Stage 4 has improved significantly, albeit from a low starting point. There is good collaboration between most schools and the colleges in extending curriculum choice through the increased flexibility project. Participation rates have doubled and success rates are satisfactory. However, four schools do not yet participate in the project and, as a consequence, some young people do not have the opportunities they should for vocational studies at Key Stage 4. This is a weakness. Good progress is also being made by most secondary schools and colleges in collaborating on the introduction of specialised diplomas.

64. Education and training provision overall for those aged 16-19 is good. A large majority of those in full-time education or training attend local further education colleges. These provide a wide choice of options and the quality of this provision is mainly outstanding or good. Success rates are above national averages at levels one, two and three. However, most of the eight schools with sixth forms offer only a narrow academic curriculum. In order to extend curriculum choice post-16, a county-wide bus pass has been introduced for those aged 16 and above who are in full-time education or training. The number of young people applying for this pass so that they can attend college has increased significantly. A county-wide moped loan scheme, with appropriate rider training, also operates in rural areas. However, neither of these initiatives includes concessions for those from low income families.

65. Opportunities for work-based learning are similarly very limited in a few parts of the county and the proportion of young people in apprenticeships is lower than the national average. However, success rates are good. The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training is amongst the lowest in the country and this is similarly the case for care leavers compared to the average elsewhere. Provision to reduce the numbers of children and young people not in education, employment or training is good; this includes a project targeted at care leavers. Post-16 provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has increased, but is not yet sufficiently extensive to ensure that all young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have appropriate personalised learning programmes. However, participation by those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in apprenticeships is above the national average.

66. The provision of accessible childcare to support parents who wish to enter the labour market or further education and training is good, particularly bearing in the mind the rural nature of much of the county. The availability of childcare facilities is well publicised, as is the range of benefits and tax credit entitlements. Although unemployment in the county is below the national average, much employment is low paid and without training. Community regeneration projects are yet to have a significant impact on widening employment opportunities for young people. The percentage of young people progressing to higher education is above the national average. Employment opportunities for graduates within the county are insufficient to enable most young people who progress to higher education to secure suitable employment locally.

67. Insufficient affordable housing is available for young people. The same applies for families with children and this means that many live in accommodation which is no longer suitable for their needs. Waiting lists for public sector housing are long. House prices are very high relative to average incomes and hence most people have to look to the private rented sector. However, rent levels in that sector, too, are high relative to average incomes. Within this context, successful measures are taken to prioritise the needs of the most vulnerable. For example, the provision of suitable accommodation for care

leavers and for very young parents and their children is good. There is some good provision, too, for homeless young people, although this is insufficient overall and inconsistent across the county.

Service management

68. **The management of services for children and young people is good.** The shared ambitions of the local authority and its partners are good. They are both challenging and clearly stated in key planning documents. Local needs and the strengths and weaknesses of existing services have been assessed effectively and ambitions are well-informed accordingly. Assessment processes include good consultation with stakeholders, including children and young people. Arrangements for information sharing between partners enable best use to be made of what is learnt. Good use is also made of equalities impact assessments to capture the needs and priorities of diverse communities. Workforce planning also clearly identifies the action needed for the local authority and its partners to respond to the increasing diversity amongst children and young people and families locally. However, there are currently often delays in securing the services of interpreters to assist in communication with children and young people and their parents and carers.

69. Prioritisation processes are similarly good. The Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) has been produced by an effective local strategic partnership. There is a strong commitment to collaborative working from all the main public agencies and this is reflected in work on the ground as well as at strategic level. The CYPP priorities are consistent with those in the children and young people's theme of the local area agreement. They are similarly consistent with the priorities in the development plans of each partner agency.

70. One weakness is in the documentation of decisions. Many key documents fail to capture the underlying rationale for the choices made. This includes the needs assessments undertaken, the options considered, and balancing of pros and cons which led to the direction taken. In many cases, the documentation does not do justice to the quality of the work done in such respects. This means that that it is much less useful than it might be for explaining and justifying why key decisions have been made to the very wide and numerous group of stakeholders within the county. Whilst a lot of time and effort is put into communicating in other ways, Somerset is too big and diverse for these means alone to be sufficient and many stakeholders are often unsure why change is to be made and what it will mean for them.

71. The capacity of the council and its partners to deliver better outcomes for children and young people is good. Leadership at senior officer and elected member level within the local authority is very good, as it is in partner agencies like the police and health service. This leadership is based on excellent working knowledge of local needs and the detail of service delivery. Working relationships between officers and elected members are productive and based on a very good grasp of the strengths each can offer. Good steps are being

taken to build capacity within the voluntary and community sector to contribute to the development of services for children and young people. These are well linked to the development of new locality working arrangements.

72. Good progress is being made in establishing the Common Assessment Framework locally. Eligibility criteria for service provision have been agreed and the pilot locality working arrangements are based on a clear model for delivering coordinated family support. The new Integrated Children's System, which has been purpose built for Somerset, is very well designed. It is being rolled out through a phased programme and will be fully operational in June 2007. It has good information sharing capacity and is very user-friendly. Planning for implementation is detailed and thorough, and the associated training for staff is very good.

73. Resource allocation is closely linked to priorities, financial management is strong, and good value for money is provided. Formal budget pooling is relatively underdeveloped but effective where it exists. The commissioning of more flexible, community-based children's health services is constrained by NHS funding arrangements. Overall, however, the local authority and its partners have effective, integrated commissioning arrangements across a range of services for vulnerable people. These principally focus on how each will commit its staffing resources to provide integrated packages of support to children and young people and families. Opportunities to bid for additional grant funding are taken up to good effect. Spending by the local authority on special educational needs as a proportion of overall spending on schools is comparatively very high. This is consistent with special educational needs being a policy priority for a long period of time and the quality of services is very good. However, the local authority is now rightly reviewing whether further funding should be committed to such support, as it would wholly or mainly have to be diverted from other spending areas. The council is also working effectively with schools to manage any uncommitted balances they have.

74. Workforce planning and development is strong and clearly linked to the delivery of service needs and development priorities. This is particularly so for the development of the new co-located and multi-agency 'locality teams'. Team building and developing new skills for working and managing within the new multi-disciplinary settings are all being addressed in a comprehensive programme of training and other activity. The timetable for introducing the new arrangements also takes proper heed of the activities and time needed to develop team working which is effective and sustainable in practice. The local authority has responded effectively to its difficulties in recruiting social workers and has been very strong in terms of 'growing its own'. Sickness absence for social services staff working with children and families is significantly lower than the average in similar councils.

75. Performance management is good. Senior managers and elected members closely monitor key performance indicators on at least a quarterly basis and effective use is made of data more generally. Good use is also made

of a range of other ways of gathering information on service quality. Not least amongst these are direct contacts with service users and front line staff. A considerable amount of time and effort is put in by the elected member portfolio holders for children's services and senior officers to ensure that they have a good grasp of service quality 'on the ground'. This sends out strong and positive messages about the local authority's and strategic partnership's priorities. A good example of this close, 'hands on' way of working is the local authority's corporate parenting board. Elected members and officers meet regularly and frequently with looked after children and take good heed of what they hear and see.

76. The strength of elected member and senior officer leadership, the commitment to partnership working, and the quality of key processes like needs assessment, planning and performance review mean that services have a good capacity to improve.

Annex: The children and young people's section of the corporate assessment report

1. The overall performance of council services for children and young people is good. There are few major weaknesses in services provision as such, although the quality of much documentation needs to be improved. This extends from strategic plans to individual case files.

2. Concerns about children and young people's welfare are dealt with consistently and appropriately. The Local Safeguarding Children Board is working effectively and child protection policies and procedures are robust. Thresholds for the involvement of social care staff are appropriate and consistently interpreted. Child protection key worker roles are well understood and effectively carried out. Managers' oversight of social work practice is effective. However their contribution, as with other aspects of casework, is often not adequately recorded. All newly appointed staff receive appropriate Criminal Records Bureau and identity checks. There are robust processes to track children known to be missing from education and/or home and to provide packages of care for children at risk of becoming looked after. Adoption and fostering services are good. Children and young people who are looked after feel well supported by their carers.

3. Sufficient and accessible early years education and day-care provision is available and its quality is similar to that in other areas. The one exception is education within the Foundation Stage in schools. Good progress has been made in opening a network of children's centres across the county. Monitoring, challenge and support for schools generally has improved significantly within the last two years. The local authority has responded decisively and effectively to a hitherto declining position. Support for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is outstanding. However, support for the management of behaviour in schools is a weakness. There is good provision for young people unable to attend school and for other potentially vulnerable groups, such as looked after children. The youth service is outstanding.

4. Children and young people are well supported in developing socially and emotionally. There is effective partnership working with the health service on a range of preventative and responsive activity to improve children's and young people's health. Action to reduce antisocial behaviour and offending by children and young people is good. Opportunities for children and young people to express their views and to influence the development of services are also good.

5. Young people are generally well prepared for working life, although careers education and guidance in a small minority of secondary schools is unsatisfactory. There have been significant improvements in the development of a coherent strategy for 14-19 education and training within the last couple of years. However, not all secondary schools yet provide adequate opportunities for vocational studies at Key Stage 4. Education and training provision overall

for those aged 16-19 is good, as is support to reduce the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training. Within a context of insufficient affordable housing, successful measures are taken to meet the accommodation needs of the most vulnerable.

6. Partnership working with other agencies on the provision of services to children and young people and families is a strength generally. Leadership at senior officer and elected member level within the local authority is very good and management processes overall are strong. The local authority's capacity to deliver better outcomes for children and young people is good.