Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0117 945 6293
Direct F 0117 945 6554
South_APA@ofsted.gov.uk

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Mr Colin Diamond
Director of Children and Young People's Services
North Somerset Council
Walliscote Grove Road
Town Hall
Weston-super-Mare
BS23 1UJ

Dear Mr Diamond

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NORTH SOMERSET COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment 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 and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. The letter comments on progress since the recent joint area review. 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

North Somerset Council consistently delivers good services above the minimum requirements. The council has responded positively to the recommendations raised in the joint area review report and has made significant progress in all areas. The contribution the council makes towards improving outcomes for being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic well-being continues to be good. Leadership of children's services is robust and the council, together with its partners, has laid good foundations to increase integrated working. It has ambitious plans to ensure further service improvements. Although full implementation of these plans is only just commencing there is a strong commitment by the council to improve all children's 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. No health recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

Parents and carers continue to receive good advice and support. There is clear evidence of effective partnership working within preventative services that has a positive impact for children and young people, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

Ofsted inspections of early years childcare and school settings judged that all were satisfactory or better in enabling children and young people to be healthy. Schools in high areas of deprivation are prioritised for additional support in recognition of the fact that for children and young people living in these areas, health outcomes are poorer. The council exceeded by 17% the national target of 50% for the number of schools with Healthy School Status by December 2006. Exercise and participation in sport is actively encouraged and the introduction of the Young Person's Key has increased the availability and take up of a wide range of discounted sporting and social activities.

The number of teenage pregnancies continues to be significantly reduced with the rate of teenage conception 6% below similar councils and 8% less than national rates. During the last year over 2,500 young people visited the No Worries programme to receive confidential sexual health advice and guidance. A large majority of 12- to 15-year-olds report they have appropriate advice and information on healthy eating, smoking, alcohol, drugs and relationships.

The Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) has made good progress by expanding its service provision to include all 16- to 17-year-olds and improving access for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Waiting times for assessment have reduced significantly.

Support for vulnerable groups such as looked after children and young people is good. Health assessments are holistic and cover healthy eating, active lifestyles, giving up smoking, sexual health and substance misuse. However, in 2006/07, 12 looked after children and young people did not receive their annual health and dental check. Although performance is above that of similar councils and the national average, the council is monitoring outcomes to ensure improvement during 2007/08. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are effectively prioritised so that they benefit from early integration of services.

Area for development

- Ensure all looked after children and young people receive annual health and dental checks.

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. Three recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For immediate action

- Ensure that statutory childcare work is consistently allocated to qualified social workers and, where this proves difficult, properly record and notify appropriate members and the Local Safeguarding Children Board of the situation.

For action in the next six months

- Agree as a priority thresholds and eligibility for services at different levels and ensure that staff in all agencies are aware of the agreed approach.
- Ensure that the current Placement Strategy is developed into a commissioning strategy that secures the best placement options with relevant partners and providers.

Since the joint area review the council has ensured that all statutory childcare work is allocated to registered and experienced social workers. The Local Safeguarding Children Board receives regular social care performance reports. Progress has been made in developing revised thresholds and eligibility criteria for children's services. The revised thresholds and criteria have been devised to underpin the common assessment framework due to be introduced across the authority in 2008. The Local Safeguarding Children Board has approved a first draft.

The council acknowledges that progress in developing a commissioning strategy has been subject to some delay but it is now in its final draft. Consultation has taken place with partner agencies and service providers. Support to parents and carers to prevent family breakdown are key principles that underpin the new strategy that has been widened to include preventive services, fostering services and residential care.

There has been good performance over a majority of other indicators. There has been an improvement in the number of referrals of children and young people in need who then require an initial assessment, some 76.6% from last year's 70.1%. However, the percentage of assessments completed within seven working days remained at 67.7%. The percentage of full (core) assessments completed within 35 days dropped by 1% from 79% in 2005/6 to 78% in 2006/7, in line with national figures but just below similar councils. The council is reviewing its assessment processes. Although there has been some small variation in the council's child protection data, its performance remains good and overall is in line with similar councils. The council has maintained 100% of reviews of children and young people on the Child Protection Register carried out within timescale and all children and young people on the Child Protection Register are allocated to a qualified social worker.

Children and young people report feeling safe around the local area, on public transport, going to and from school and in their homes. Survey results show that these positive responses are higher than the national average. A large majority of children and young people report never having been bullied at school and there are

effective anti-bullying strategies in schools. The number of children and young people seriously injured or killed in road traffic accidents remains low.

The council has a low rate of looked after children and young people, in line with similar councils. Stability of placements remains an area of good performance and a great majority of looked after children and young people are placed in foster care. Case reviews of looked after children and young people held on time have reduced significantly from 90.4% to 82.7%, although they remain in line with similar councils and national figures. The council now has robust arrangements in place to monitor performance and there is early indication that its previous level of performance in this respect will be restored during 2007/08.

Areas for development

- Ensure thresholds and eligibility criteria for services are agreed and implemented.
- Ensure Commissioning Strategy is agreed between agencies and implemented.
- Ensure initial and core assessment practices are reviewed and that initial assessments are completed within seven working days.
- Ensure reviews of looked after children and young people are carried out within statutory timescales.

Enjoying and achieving — 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 positive work identified at the time of the joint area review has been maintained. No recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

Support for early years settings is good. Focused work has been instrumental in the development of effective assessment procedures in the early years. Schools in the authority have continued to achieve standards above national averages at all key stages and generally in line with, and sometimes above, similar high-achieving councils. Standards at Key Stage 1 have shown a particular improvement in writing. Standards remain high at the end of Key Stage 2 with trends in improvement above those for similar councils and nationally. Intensive support for English in the Key Stage 3 years of secondary schools has resulted in a considerable improvement in the unvalidated results for this subject in 2007. GCSE results continued to improve in 2006 with almost 60% of pupils gaining five or more A* to C grades and 48% gaining five or more A* to G grades including English and mathematics. This is in line with similar councils and national figures. Improvement has been maintained in the 2007 results. All secondary schools achieve above the Department for Children Schools and Families floor targets for GCSE. Overall, rates of progress are improving,

although the progress made by pupils between Key Stage 2 to GCSE remains below the national average and improvement is a clear priority for the council. Pupils enjoy school and appreciate the opportunities available to them. Inspection evidence indicates that pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve well. However, a relatively small number of looked after children and young people achieve well at 16 years of age when compared with national figures. Work on attendance in secondary schools has been effective in reducing absences. Exclusions remain low in number and for those who are excluded, effective full-time alternative provision is provided.

In the most recent survey undertaken by the Audit Commission, a significant number of schools expressed dissatisfaction with the support provided by the council for children and young people from minority ethnic groups and those for whom English is an additional language. The council acknowledges that there have been some difficulties in the provision of specialist support, although investment in services has increased over the last year. It has recently completed a new service level agreement to provide support for these groups across several local authorities and the council believe that this will be more effective in meeting the needs of children and young people in North Somerset.

Areas for development

- Improve pupils' overall rate of progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4.
- Ensure effective support for children and young people from minority ethnic groups and those for whom English is an additional language.

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 overall. One recommendation emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the next six months

- Develop an independent advocacy service to meet the individual and collective needs of children and young people including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, those looked after by the council and those in need.

Sound preliminary steps have been taken to develop an independent advocacy service. The council has involved young people including those in care to take part in the formal tendering process for an independent advocacy service. Barnardo's have been appointed as the independent advocates and a specific post holder was appointed in July 2007. The service is aimed at looked after children and young people, care leavers and those who have respite care for over 24 hours. Procedures

are in place to monitor take up and report quarterly to the service manager. The advocacy service works in tandem with support groups for disabled children and young people and the independent visitor scheme for children and young people in long-term care. However, although a great deal of preparatory work has been undertaken, the appointment to the advocacy post is too recent to judge the impact on the lives of children and young people or how the role will interact with already established systems of support.

Most children and young people in North Somerset contribute very well to their schools and communities. There is active engagement in school councils and the Youth Parliament, with a student parliament representative on the Scrutiny Panel of the authority to advise elected members. The Weston Federation Student Parliament recently gained the national Leading Aspect award for its work. A post-16 leadership group involves students from all secondary schools including special schools and Weston College. An initiative to promote the positive achievements of children and young people in local newspapers has been effective in reaching a large audience.

The youth offending team has a high profile in the local authority and has established good partnership links with a number of local agencies, contributing to good performance on key targets such as substance misuse and mental health. There are good participation rates in reviews for looked after children and young people that compare favourably with similar councils and national figures. Transitions for young people aged 14 to 19 with disabilities are tracked through a multi-disciplinary group ensuring that their needs are met appropriately.

Area for development

- Ensure effective coordination of the systems to provide advocacy services, in particular to children and young people who are looked after, have learning difficulties and/or disabilities or in need.

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. Four recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For action in the next six months

- Improve and extend access and choice to the full range of the 14–19 curriculum.

- Ensure that there is sufficient and suitable housing to meet the individual and collective needs of children and young people including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, those looked after by the council and those in need.

- Ensure that a detailed strategy is in place to develop a wider range of placement options for care leavers and is being progressed.

For action in the longer term

- Increase employment opportunities within the local area for young people, particularly for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

There are good signs of progress in the development of the full range of the 14–19 curriculum. There is an established strategic leadership group, which is developing this initiative, supported by a larger group representing all partners. Two diploma lines have been awarded for 2008, information technology and creative media, both of which have seconded teachers working on their development. Submissions for a further four diploma lines will be submitted in the autumn including those which were unsuccessful earlier. The council is working well with partners to develop Level 1 and pre-Level 1 provision. There is a high level of attainment at Level 3 for 19-year-olds. Work is at an advanced stage for a skills centre in the north of the authority, which will improve vocational provision up to and including Level 2, recognised by the council as an area of need. The number of young people between the ages of 16 to 18 who are not in education, employment or training is lower than for similar councils and nationally.

Good work has been undertaken to improve the accommodation options for young people including vulnerable groups. Year-on-year increases in affordable housing have been introduced following a fundamental review in 2003/04. The appointment of a jointly funded post to focus on the housing needs of vulnerable groups has led to effective early intervention. The number of 16- to 17-year-olds accepted as statutorily homeless fell by almost 50% in 2005, and in 2006/07 fell a further 21%. The establishment of a training flat specifically for care leavers has been effective in supporting this vulnerable group to become independent.

The council has worked well to ensure that a detailed strategy is in place to develop a wider range of placement options for care leavers. This has been developed alongside the options for more appropriate housing for care leavers and systems of support for this vulnerable group including extended foster care.

The council takes its role as the largest employer in the area very seriously. It has established successful schemes to employ more apprentices, care leavers and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. On the broader front, as part of the development of the 14–19 curriculum the council has mapped employers in the authority for each of five diploma lines and has a champion employer for each.

Area for development

- Build on the experience gained to re-submit the unsuccessful diploma lines.

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, and its management of these services is also good. Two recommendations emerged from the joint area review.

For immediate action

- Improve member training to ensure that information is understood and that policy and scrutiny provide robust challenge of performance.
- Clarify the specific roles and responsibilities of the Policy and Scrutiny Committee and Children's Champion Group and how they fit with the new structures such as the Children's Trust Board to enable stakeholders to engage with them.

Since the joint area review was carried out, the council has made good progress and instituted induction and training for elected members. There is greater clarification of roles and responsibilities of the Policy and Scrutiny Panel and the Children's Champion Group and there is now political representation on the Children's Trust Board.

The council has good capacity to improve its services for children and young people and its management of these services is strong. There is effective senior leadership and corporate support for improving the children's services provision. The review of the comprehensive and detailed 2006 Children and Young People's Plan shows that good progress is being made across all five outcome areas. Clear performance management strategies underpin this progress.

Although levels of central government funding are low, the council has sought to invest significant funding in the education and care of children and young people and this is reflected in the outcomes for children and young people which are good. North Somerset is a relatively small and compact authority. There are efficiency gains and substantial benefits for service users from its cooperative and collaborative arrangements with other agencies. Financial resources are well managed and joint commissioning strategies are being developed effectively to improve service delivery and further enhance capacity.

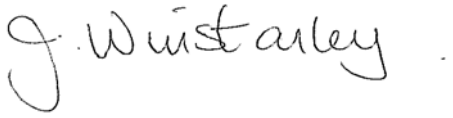
Area for development

- Ensure continued robust performance during the implementation phase of the change for children programme.

Overall the council has demonstrated good progress in meeting the joint area review 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



Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection