

26 November 2007

Mr Paul Burnett
Director of Children and Young People
Children and Young People's Service
Northamptonshire County Council
PO Box 93
County Hall, George Row
Northamptonshire
NN1 1AN

Dear Mr Burnett

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNTY 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 (CYPP) where it was available, and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this process and for the time given by you and your colleagues during the assessment.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 2

The council consistently provides services for children and young people at an adequate level. It has areas of notable strength and makes a good contribution in ensuring that children and young people are encouraged to stay safe and that their economic well-being is enhanced. This has been achieved against a backdrop of important changes to senior staff and the need to make considerable financial savings. Other important aspects of the council's work, including the promotion of children and young people's health and their enjoyment and achievement, are adequate. A significant challenge facing the council is that a relatively high number of schools, especially primary schools, are a cause for concern. The council has demonstrated through its actions that it has an adequate capacity to improve.

Being healthy

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Immunisation rates are high and all general practitioners provide child health surveillance services. By January 2009, there will be 31 children's

centres in the county. Following a consultation process, health partners have made a 'core health offer' to all the centres which includes input from health visiting, maternity services, mental health services, and speech and language therapists.

However, the prevention of smoking in pregnancy lacks a consistent approach. There is a dedicated worker in the south but not in the north of the county. The new Primary Care Trust is working towards a county-wide strategy. Where there are areas with a higher incidence of low birth weight babies, or a low proportion of mothers initiating breast-feeding, there are no specific targets for improvement. A county-wide breast-feeding strategy group and a pilot project for breast-feeding have been established.

The overall decrease in the number of conceptions amongst 15-17 year olds between 1998 and 2005, the last year for which figures are available, is 8.7%. This is considerably lower than the reduction in other comparable councils and the national average. There continue to be high rates in Corby, Wellingborough, Kettering and Northampton. The council has initiated the 'Teens and Toddlers' programme that selects those in Years 9 and 10 thought to be most at risk of early parenthood. In groups of six, they work at local neighbourhood nurseries or primary schools to better understand how difficult child care can be.

By July 2007, 10% of schools had achieved the national Healthy Schools Standard, against a national target of 50%. A recovery plan is in operation, with targets of 47% of schools to achieve this status by March 2008 and 75% by December 2009. There are significantly fewer 'outstanding' and 'good' judgements, arising from school inspections, in terms of 'enabling learners to be healthy' than found in comparable councils.

There is good progress towards a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). All young people with acute mental health needs referred by the Youth Offending Service were seen within five working days. For substance misuse referrals from Youth Offending Services, the county did better than its comparators in young people being assessed within five working days and receiving intervention and treatment within ten working days. The Primary Care Trust is making a stronger effort at producing a consistent approach to waiting times by re-commissioning the whole service. Children and young people who are looked after and adopted will have a specialist service within this.

There is a centre for health for looked after children and young people to promote their health and ensure that health and dental assessments take place. The indicator for the health of looked after children and young people has shown continuous improvement since 2004/05 and performance is better than comparable councils and the national average.

The learning disability service in health covers the whole age range, including adults. In the south, there is a child development centre and in the north a child development and assessment team that works more in the community. The Primary

Care Trust and children's services do not yet jointly commission services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and this currently leads to an inefficient use of resources.

Areas for development

- Ensure that multi-agency strategies lead to the delivery of improved services for the prevention of smoking in pregnancy, low birth weight babies and the initiation of breast-feeding.
- Extend multi-agency work to prevent teenage pregnancy.
- Ensure that the recovery plan to achieve the healthy schools standard against national targets is successful.
- Develop a joint commissioning approach to services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities so that resources are used more efficiently.

Staying safe

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. In 2005, the last year for which figures are available, there had been a 57% reduction in road traffic accidents involving children and young people, compared with the average figure between 1994 and 1998. Northamptonshire is well on the way to achieving the national target of a 50% reduction by 2010.

School inspection judgements show that children and young people were taught appropriately about staying safe.

Four locally based family resource centres that offer intensive support to families with complex needs have recently been opened. They have worked with over 450 children and young people and have assisted families in crisis. A family group conference scheme has also dealt with more than its target of 140 families in 2006/07. Over the last three years, the county has had a significantly lower percentage of children and young people being looked after than comparable councils or the national average.

The rate of referral of children to social care services has increased steadily over recent years but remains lower than statistical neighbours. For the last three years, council services have consistently completed initial assessments of more than 80% of these referrals within timescales, markedly more than the average for statistical neighbours or nationally. The percentage of repeat referrals was average. In 2006/07, more than 90% of core assessments were completed within 35 days, much better than statistical neighbours or the national average. The joint area review report, published in August 2006, identified that the duty and referral arrangements

in one area of the county were weak. These have now been strengthened. The joint area review also found that multi-agency public protection arrangements were not sufficiently robust. As a consequence, the council has strengthened these.

All children on the child protection register have been allocated a qualified social worker since 2004/05 and all child protection cases have been reviewed on time since then.

New inter-agency procedures were adopted by the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) in January 2006. There is a secure training centre in the county and external support for the safeguarding manager. 'UR voice' is a project to encourage the attendance of children and their parents at conferences and in 2006/07, 68% of conferences were attended by at least one parent. Few children remain on the child protection register for extended periods because more senior professionals are invited to attend an additional review meeting if child protection issues in a particular case are unresolved.

Against this generally positive picture of child protection work, there are areas of concern that are being dealt with or which require further attention. In 2006/07, only 21% of child protection conferences were held within 15 days of enquiries having been made, a much lower figure than the national average. The council has investigated this and has found that their returns related to the date of referral, which precedes the enquiry, and this has been rectified. The majority of medical assessments in child protection cases were being completed by general practitioners. However, the council, with its health partners, is seeking new arrangements with community based paediatricians. There were concerns in the joint area review report about the quality of line management supervision within social care, with slippage in the programme of audits by managers. The council recognises that audits need to take place more consistently and a new system is being set up. Some recommendations from serious case reviews dating back to 2003 and 2004 have not been fully acted upon as they were poorly written and therefore difficult to put into practice. The council has agreed to take these issues back to the LSCB for further consideration.

New policy and procedures on private foster care were established in September 2006. Six private foster care arrangements have been identified. There is a multi-agency procedure on children and young people who go missing, either from home or from care. Looked after children and young people who run away are offered an appointment with the children's rights service.

Since 2004/05, all looked after children and young people have had a named qualified social worker. Performance in adoption work is excellent, with more than 10% of looked after children and young people becoming adopted in this performance year. In the short term, children and young people benefited from relative stability in placements. In the long term, stability of placement was below the national average. As a response, the council intends to make a 'Pledge' to all looked after children and young people in Years 10 and 11 to do all it can to

maintain them in placements. For care leavers, the proportion with pathway plans was close to the national average but one fifth did not have a personal advisor in 2006/07. With additional recruitment, this gap has now been closed. Reviews for looked after children and young people were held on time in only 69% of cases in 2006/07, a slight decline on the preceding year and well below the national average of 85%. This has been tightened up and so far in 2007/08 the council is reporting over 89% being held on time.

Ninety percent of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities had a transition plan to adult care services. There are well-developed support services, including a respite unit for those with challenging behaviour. One hundred children and young people receive direct payments so that they and their families can purchase services. These aspects of the service are well developed.

Areas for development

- Ensure child protection conferences are held within 15 days of enquiries.
- Approve and implement new protocols and arrangements for the medical assessment of children subject to child protection procedures to ensure there is a consistent approach across the county.
- Clear the backlog of recommendations from serious case reviews and ensure future recommendations can be put into practice.
- Ensure that statutory reviews for looked after children and young people are held on time.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Findings from school inspections show that an overwhelming majority of children and young people enjoy their education and some value it highly. The behaviour of most is either good or outstanding. Good provision is offered by providers of funded nursery education. A significantly larger proportion of full day care is good across both day care and funded nursery education compared with the national average. However, relatively little is outstanding. The council provides good support to such settings. The Key Stage 1 results in reading and writing were above the national averages. Pupils made satisfactory progress from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 and their results in English and science were broadly in line with the national averages at the end of Key Stage 2. Pupils made satisfactory progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3. Key Stage 3 results in mathematics were broadly in line with national averages for the expected Level 5, while in science they were slightly above average. Inspection findings show that marginally more than half of primary school pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress. In the GCSE examinations, the achievements of looked after children and

young people are good and the proportion achieving at least five grades A*-C and at least one grade A*-G was above that of comparable councils and national averages.

Overall, however, there are some areas of concern. Recent results in the GCSE examinations for those attaining at least five grades A*-C were below the average for statistical neighbours and national averages. The contextual value added from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 indicated unsatisfactory progress for pupils. Inspection findings indicate that slightly less than one third of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good or outstanding progress, markedly lower than the findings in other secondary schools nationally. Levels of exclusions, especially in some Northampton schools, are a cause for concern. Both fixed-period and permanent exclusions for secondary schools in 2006 were above the national average, although there are indications that overall figures are beginning to fall. By March 2007, less than half the excluded children and young people were receiving sufficient full-time education. This is a very low figure. The council reports that they all now receive full-time education. Levels of attendance for 2005/06 are also a cause for concern. The targets set in the CYPP for improving attendance in both primary and secondary schools in 2006 were missed. The proportion of schools below the 25% and 30% academic floor targets is significantly more than the national average but this situation is now improving. There are far too many schools, especially primary schools, whose performance is causing concern both to Ofsted and to the council. Twenty two schools are causing concern to Ofsted and a further 16 to 18 are causing concern to the council.

Areas for development

- Reduce the number of schools that are causing concern.
- Ensure that children and young people in secondary schools make much better progress.
- Improve overall attendance rates in schools.
- Ensure that levels of exclusions continue to fall and that sufficient provision is made for children and young people who have been permanently excluded.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. The youth service has recently been reconfigured to a small number of directly employed commissioning staff, with the service to young people being provided by voluntary organisations and private contractors. In 2005/06, 10.6% of young people between the ages of 13-19 were in contact with the service, against a national target of 25%. This increased to 46% in 2006/07, reflecting the innovative approaches taken by the council. In 2006/07, 16.2% were participants in programmes, against a national target of 15%. The county council is working

towards an 'integrated youth offer' by April 2008. The youth service is now making a better contribution to outcomes for children and young people.

There are effective mentoring programmes for looked after children and young people, those from Black and minority ethnic groups and children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities at school. A multi-agency carers' strategy group commissions an effective service from Northamptonshire Young Carers.

Although all secondary schools and most primary schools have school councils, the local authority recognises that their effectiveness varies. It is, therefore, issuing further guidance to schools on these.

There are seven youth forums, one in each district or borough council area, supported by staff from the county council and Connexions. Two hundred and fifty children and young people are involved. There is also a county youth forum. A 'Strategic Active Involvement Group' has assisted children and young people in preparing their 'Children and Young People's Charter of Involvement'. A participation worker is being appointed to facilitate work towards a three-stage quality award for organisations which will recognise the involvement of children and young people. The county council is currently consulting organisations and children and young people about creating a shadow Children and Young People's Board and there is a proposal for this Board to elect two children and young people to sit in on the Council's main board meetings, on a rota basis. These institutional arrangements have been slow to develop. However, there are areas where children and young people have had an impact on developments. For example, they have raised the issues of bullying and school attendance, and both are now priorities in the CYPP. They have also participated in the appointment of over 80 council staff. The involvement of children and young people from vulnerable groups such as looked after children and young people, children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those from Black and minority ethnic groups is increasing.

Northamptonshire County Council has provided significant funding to support neighbourhood policing. Five anti-social behaviour units are jointly run by the Police and the district or borough councils. The county council's U-Turn service provides family support intervention to children and young people and their families when there is the risk of an anti-social behaviour order (ASBO) or the loss of a tenancy. Since November 2002, the service has worked with 504 referrals in which only nine children and young people have gone on to receive an ASBO. In Corby, there is a summer estates' programme that has led to a significant decline in ASBOs.

The Youth Offending Service received an overall poor grading in its inspection held within the joint area review framework. By looking at quality issues and through improved performance management, the service has progressed to the lower middle quartile against the Youth Justice Board performance framework. In 2006/07, there was a 15.3% decline in first time entrants to the youth justice system. The council is aware that recidivism is high. This is due to the high number of 'informal actions' through which young people are diverted into a 'Prevention Through Learning

Project'. As a consequence, the number of entrants to the youth justice system is smaller but more challenging.

In 2006/07, 73% of looked after children and young people contributed to their statutory reviews. This is well below the national average and that for comparable councils. The council has had an action plan for improvement and there are indications of recent increases in the rate of participation.

Offending by looked after children and young people has declined since 2004/05, although the use of informal action within the county means that the headline indicator is higher than that for comparable councils. There are protocols with in-house and contracted residential units. A multi-agency group has been brought together to look at these issues. Offences by looked after children and young people, however, are not routinely reviewed to see what lessons can be drawn for further activity in any performance year.

Social workers and staff from Connexions contribute well to transition reviews for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities from Year 9 onwards.

Areas for development

- Decrease re-offending rates.
- Ensure that the current progress in involving looked after children and young people in their reviews is maintained.
- Ensure that offending by looked after children and young people is reduced.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. Partnership working, especially in areas of high social disadvantage, is a strength. This has enabled wider access to services for young people, including the use of family resources centres, increased use of Connexions and the piloting of a significant number of parent support advisers' projects. There is good collaboration between stakeholders in developing and implementing the 14-19 strategy across the county. This has resulted in a marked increase in the take-up of post-16 education with a continued increase in participation in colleges of further education in 2006/2007. There has also been a significant increase in the proportion of young people completing an apprenticeship. The success rate in achieving national vocational qualifications for all work-based learners under the age of 19 in 2006 was slightly above the national average. The multi-disciplinary extended services team is working well in collaboration with schools. The target of 30 extended schools has been achieved and these provide young people with a range of appropriate services.

The council has been especially successful in enhancing the life chances for some vulnerable groups. A relatively high proportion of young people who have been in local authority care have continued into further education, or have secured employment or training. In addition, the proportion of 16 to 18 year olds who were not in education, employment or training fell in the two years from 2005 to 2007. The stretch target for reducing this figure was successfully achieved. Connexions exceeded its target for gathering information about those young people whose destinations were previously in the "not known" category. The needs of teenage parents are being better addressed so that they become self-reliant and, ultimately, economically independent. A ten-unit service for teenage parents opened in Northampton in September 2006 and another 10 units of flexible capacity have been provided by a local housing association. Another 20 teenage parents are offered housing with additional support, giving them the opportunity to lead more self-sufficient lives.

Notwithstanding the above, there are areas where the council does not perform as well as it could do. The proportion of 19 year olds achieving Level 3 qualifications fell to slightly below the national average and that for statistical neighbours. There has also been a decrease in work-based learning. There has been a significant decline in the number of out-of-school and crèche facilities and places, in contrast to the overall increase nationally. School inspection findings show that six secondary schools did not adequately help young people to develop their workplace and other skills that would contribute to their future economic well-being.

Areas for development

- Improve attainment in Level 3 qualifications.
- Improve participation rates in work-based learning.

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

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council has an adequate capacity to improve its services for children and young people. This is demonstrated, for example, by the action that is being taken to realign services in response to the need to make considerable financial savings. This is being done against a background of some significant changes to senior leadership in the recent past. A new Chief Executive of the County Council has recently taken up post and a substantive Director of Children's Services is due to take up post on 16 October 2007. The Chief Executive of Northampton Borough Council, who was chair of the Partnership Board, also left recently. However, the interim director of Children's Services and other senior leaders have been effective in ensuring that improvements to provision continue to be made. Such action has ensured that partnership working drives forward developments, for example in the implementation of the 14-19 strategy.

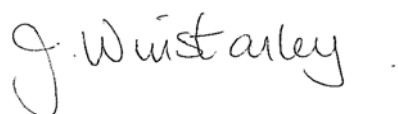
There are early signs that the recent creation of the new Primary Care Trust and the appointment of a children and young people's commissioner are leading to much better partnership working. There is increasing rigour in reviewing performance, resulting in improved outcomes for children and young people. There have also been improvements in addressing some of the weaker indicators of the performance assessment framework. However, the CYPP is not explicitly costed and this does not yet allow the council to ensure that appropriate services are delivered within the given budgetary constraints. Greater integrated working between education and social care is not yet fully developed. Children and young people, especially those from vulnerable groups, are not yet sufficiently involved in the planning and delivery of services. Commissioning, including the need to ensure stronger joint commissioning for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, is not yet fully developed.

Areas for development

- Ensure that the Children and Young People's Plan is explicitly costed.
- Ensure that children and young people, especially those from vulnerable groups, are more fully involved in the planning and delivery of services.
- Ensure that joint commissioning is strengthened.

The children's services grade is the performance rating for the purpose of section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will also provide the score for the children and young people service block in the comprehensive performance assessment to be published by the Audit Commission.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection