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Making Social Care
Better for People



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Dear Mr Prewett

2006 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN DORSET

This letter summarises the findings of the 2006 annual performance assessment (APA) process for your local authority. We are grateful for the information which you provided to support this process and for the time made available by yourself and your colleagues to discuss relevant issues.

Summary

Areas for judgement	Grade awarded¹
The contribution of <i>the local authority's children's services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people	3
The council's overall <i>capacity to improve</i> its services for children and young people	3
The contribution of <i>the local authority's social care services</i> in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people	3

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Grade	Service descriptors	Capacity to improve descriptors
4	A service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users	Excellent / outstanding
3	A service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for users	Good
2	A service that delivers only minimum requirements for users	Adequate
1	A service that does not deliver minimum requirements for users	Inadequate

Dorset County Council consistently delivers above minimum requirements for children and young people. The majority of services can demonstrate how they are improving the achievement and well-being of children and young people. Standards and achievement in schools are good overall and the council is working hard to improve performance in sixth forms. Early years services are a strength and give children a good start in life. Disadvantaged children and young people are also well supported through the child protection and care systems. Support for children with disabilities and their families is also good. Many of the areas identified in last year's APA have been subject to carefully targeted action and this has led to improved performance against a number of key indicators. This includes significantly improved GCSE results for looked after children. The council has an accurate view of its own strengths and areas for development, which is reflected in its self-assessment. More information about outcomes rather than provision and processes would make the document even more informative. Children's education and care services are suitably joined up together with the health services.

Being healthy

The council makes a good contribution towards improving the health of children and young people in the area. By and large, most children in Dorset are healthy. Schools and early years settings promote health awareness by encouraging healthy eating and by ensuring regular access to sport and exercise as part of Dorset Schools Sports Strategy. It is pleasing to note that 97 out of 176 schools are accredited as healthy schools.

There is a wide range of initiatives, involving partners, to promote healthy lifestyles. These partners have established a Health Gain Fellowship which is working very effectively to improve physical health, including reducing obesity.

Lowering the rate of teenage conceptions was an area for improvement in last year's APA. Although the rate has gone down this year, Dorset is unlikely to meet the national target of halving the number of teenage pregnancies by 2010. Some interesting work is being undertaken to promote life skills with vulnerable young women but no evidence is yet available to judge effectiveness.

There has been some improvement in the availability of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). However, some key provision for those with the greatest needs, for example, children with learning disabilities and those with complex and severe mental health needs, is not yet in place. There is suitable planning and integrated working is being developed to address this. Strengthening the skills and knowledge of front line staff in providing for children and young people's mental health was an area for improvement in last year's APA. Considerable staff training has been put in place and access to tier 2 services has improved.

Health services for looked after children are good, although there is room to further improve the number of health checks undertaken for young people.

Staying safe

The council makes a good contribution to securing the safety of children and young people. There is evidence of effective partnership working, for example National Children's Homes are providing a children's rights service for looked after children, children in need and those with disabilities. The Local Safeguarding Children Board is in place.

Child protection procedures are a strength of early years provision, with all inspected providers meeting the required standards. The extent to which learners adopt safe practices is good in the majority of schools inspected and outstanding in a significant number.

All children on the Child Protection Register are allocated to a qualified social worker and reviews of their care plans are undertaken in a timely manner. The council has good anti-bullying strategies and staff in all settings exercise zero tolerance to such behaviour.

The timeliness of core assessments of children in need was an area of weakness identified last year. More core assessments have been undertaken this year, bringing Dorset in line with comparator councils, but the speed of completing them has only slightly improved and remains below comparator and national figures.

Services for looked after children are good but more work needs to be done to improve long-term placement stability and not all children are allocated to a qualified social worker. Adoptions of looked after children and the speed of placement for adoption, after the decision has been taken that it is in the best interests of the child, was identified as an area for improvement last year. Adoptions are now at an acceptable level. Placements are still too slow, but the council's explanation for this is that only a few children, all with severe needs, have required placement this year and national searches have been needed to find suitable adoptive parents. This is a reasonable explanation.

Pathway planning for care leavers was an area for improvement identified last year. Almost all eligible and relevant care leavers have a personal advisor but, disappointingly, the number with a pathway plan has not risen sufficiently to bring Dorset in line with comparator and national figures. The council is aware that this is an area which needs to be addressed.

Enjoying and achieving

The contribution the council makes to ensuring children and young people achieve at school and enjoy their education and leisure activities is good. Children receive a good education in Dorset. There is good partnership working between agencies and young people to ensure better access to play and leisure facilities, particularly in the more rural areas of the county.

Recent school inspection reports show that achievement is at least satisfactory in all schools inspected. They also show that pupils' enjoyment of their education is a strength and it is an outstanding feature in many schools.

Children's centre provision is expanding and the council has good systems in place to assess and monitor children's learning as they move on through school. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is well fostered across all early years settings inspected. The majority of teaching is judged at least satisfactory except for sessional day care where most of the teaching is good or better.

Attainment is consistent but rates of achievement vary across the key stages. Test results are generally good in Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 but trends in continuous improvement are below the national figures in Key Stages 3 and 4. The council is using national test results and inspection outcomes appropriately to target its support so that those schools with the greatest need for improvement receive more attention. It is too soon to judge the impact of this additional support. A specific priority is narrowing the gap between boys' and girls' performance. Well focused training has been provided and specialist staff appointed to support this area of work.

The numbers achieving five or more GCSEs graded at A*-C and one or more at A* -G in 2005 improved slightly from 2004 results and these are above the national average but remain in line with statistical neighbours. This is a similar picture to last year when performance at GCSE was raised as an area for improvement. The lowest attaining schools have been well targeted and have been given carefully focused intensive support to raise standards.

Attendance is broadly satisfactory but inspection evidence shows this to be the weakest aspect of performance in a few schools. The council has responded effectively to this outcome with the schools concerned and is working hard to raise awareness of the importance of good attendance in all schools.

A "virtual school" pilot has been established to educate children and young people not attending full-time school for medical reasons. This is a highly innovative development which uses a breadth of information technology resources to engage and motivate young people. This is proving to be a very effective and efficient way to deliver the full curriculum.

The proportion of looked after children attaining five or more A*-C grades at GCSE was noted as an area for improvement last year and has improved significantly, and is now well above the comparator average. The council has identified and is starting to address, the issues surrounding the high levels of looked after children who have missed more than 25 days schooling this year.

Inspection evidence shows that provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities is at least satisfactory and for the majority it is good. Progress by these pupils in Key Stages 1 and 2 is average and above average in Key Stages 3 and 4. There is also evidence that intervention strategies at Key Stage 2 have improved standards and achievement in English considerably. The timescales are not always met for completing statements of educational need, but the reasons for the slippage have now been overcome and signs of improvement are evident.

Making a positive contribution

The council makes a good contribution to outcomes for children in this area. There are good opportunities for children and young people to be involved in making decisions and choices about their future. There are some innovative projects, for example training and involving young people in interviewing and selecting key personnel in the county council, including the Director of Children's Services.

Inspection evidence shows that behaviour is good, or better, in the vast majority of schools. Support for strategies to deal with unacceptable behaviour in secondary schools, including bullying, racism and other forms of harassment, was raised as an area for improvement last year. The council has introduced a carefully structured initiative to build leadership capacity to manage behaviour in a group of secondary schools where this is an issue.

The youth service has a strong record of engaging positively with young people and there is a wide range of participation activities for younger children, those with special needs and those who are harder to involve. The service reaches a very high number of young people and is making a valuable impact on their lives.

Dorset is good at helping looked after children remain in contact with their family, friends and home community. Children and young people are helped to express their views about their care plans. There is an advocacy service for looked after children and a self advocacy scheme for children with learning disabilities. One area of weakness, which was raised last year and continues to be a concern, is the rate of offending by looked after children which remains comparatively high.

The council has made a good start in involving young people and helping them to make a contribution to the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP). A young people's version of the plan will be produced and the next edition of the council newsletter (which goes to all homes in the county) will include a four page summary of the plan written by a young person on work experience in the council and the cabinet member for children.

Achieving economic well-being

The council makes a good contribution to children and young people's economic well-being. They are well prepared for their adult lives.

Families are supported effectively in using childcare and accessing other services through the Children's Information Service. Recent school inspection evidence shows that preparation for future economic well-being is at least satisfactory and the care, guidance and support for children and young people in school are some of the strongest areas of provision.

A high proportion of young people are in education, employment or training. Standards in sixth forms are broadly average. The slow pace of improvement in attainment in sixth forms was noted as an area for improvement last year. This is starting to be addressed appropriately through intensive work with targeted schools.

It is positive that the council is developing services for young people from minority ethnic groups, for example an initiative led by the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service. This involved a Black African Muslim tutor working with individual students each week for a year to give them opportunities to share their views. Results were that engagement, achievement and attendance of these pupils improved considerably and many schools are now adopting this model.

More work is needed with partners to increase the availability of suitable accommodation for young people, particularly those who are vulnerable, for example teenage parents where access to supported housing is inconsistent across the county.

Care leavers achieve good outcomes. A very high proportion are in education, employment and training and almost all are in suitable accommodation. There are, however, issues of staffing in the leaving care team which means that preparation for independence is inconsistent and responsibility falls on care homes, foster carers and fieldwork social workers.

Transitional planning for children with disabilities was an area identified for improvement last year. There has been considerable improvement this year and most young people over the age of 14 have a transition plan in place.

The council's management of its services for children and young people, including its capacity to improve them further

The children and young people's partnership board has developed a vision for Dorset which is included in the CYPP. This is enabling the council to extend their collaborative working with partners, which includes the pooling of budgets for greater efficiency and effectiveness. It is particularly evident in working practices with health organisations. Negotiations are underway for a joint head of commissioning post.

Overall the council provides good value for money, being poorly funded but achieving broadly good outcomes for children and young people. The Audit Commission has found that Dorset demonstrates sound financial management. Whilst considerable efforts have been made to reduce surplus school places, there are areas of the county where the number of places is still too high and this is an area for improvement.

The council has well trained, suitably qualified staff across education and social care. There is a very successful school-based initial teacher training scheme particularly in providing specialists in shortage subjects in secondary education. The percentage of social care staff who left the council since last year has fallen and is below the comparator average. More is spent on staff training and a good proportion of residential staff have achieved National Vocational Qualification Level 3.

The CYPP is a comprehensive document and incorporates the separate plans from last year. There is a better awareness of the necessity to involve children and young people in planning. The council is moving in the right direction.

The council's capacity to improve further is good.

Key strengths and areas for improvement

Key strengths	Key areas for improvement
<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • over half the schools in the county are accredited as healthy schools • good partnership working through the Health Gain Fellowship • Dorset's Schools Sports Strategy promotes children's physical health • high proportion of looked after children have health checks. 	<p><i>Being healthy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • further reduce the rate of teenage conceptions • put in place CAMHS for children with learning disabilities and those with complex and severe mental health needs, developing improved integrated working, with a team approach, key worker and lead professional.
<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good anti-bullying strategy and practice in all settings • child protection procedures in early years settings • all children on the Child Protection Register are allocated to a qualified social worker and all reviews are carried out within timescales • more initial and core assessments are completed. 	<p><i>Staying safe:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complete core assessments more speedily • increase the numbers of care leavers with pathway plans • improve the long term stability of placements for looked after children.
<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • standards achieved at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 are good • the proportion of looked after children attaining five or more good GCSEs • good systems in place to monitor the progress of children from early years as they move through school • an innovative "virtual school" project for children unable to attend school for medical reasons • cross agency working to provide good access for children to play and for recreation. 	<p><i>Enjoying and achieving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure that improvements in completing statements for children with learning difficulties and disabilities within agreed timescales are consolidated • reduce the number of looked after children missing more than 25 days schooling a year.

<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • youth service has strong record of engaging positively with young people, including those who are hard to reach • contact with family and friends is well maintained for looked after children • behaviour is good, or better, in the vast majority of schools inspected • young people have been involved with planning, including the CYPP. 	<p><i>Making a positive contribution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lower the rate of offending by looked after children.
<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high proportion of young people in education, employment or training, including looked after children • Children's Information Service is well used and provides good outreach to rural communities • ethnic minority achievement service initiative to support young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds • most young people over the age of 14 with disabilities have transition plans in place. 	<p><i>Achieving economic well-being:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • for teenage parents, ensure more consistent provision of supported housing and assistance to continue in education, training or employment.
<p><i>Management of children's services</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a clear vision for children's services in the future is developing • sound financial management and good results demonstrate that the council offers good value for money • good partnership working • well trained, suitably qualified staff across education and social care. 	<p><i>Management of children's services</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduce further the number of surplus school places.

Aspects for focus in a future joint area review or the next APA

- Many initiatives have been put into place recently and whilst they look promising, there is a need to monitor and evaluate their impact on children and young people. For example, the work to improve attainment of post-16 pupils and reducing offending behaviour by looked after children.
- The rate of reduction in teenage conceptions needs to be increased and progress in achieving this should be reviewed.

- The pace of reduction in the number of surplus places in schools.

We confirm that the children's services grade will provide the score for the children and young people service block in the comprehensive performance assessment and will be published to the Audit Commission. The social care judgement is for CSCI information only.

Yours sincerely



FLO HADLEY

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