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Ms Anne Whiteley
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Dear Ms Whiteley

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN DEVON 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), your action plan arising from the joint area review (JAR), and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. The letter comments on progress since the recent JAR. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this process and for the time given by you and your colleagues during the assessment.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 2

Devon County Council consistently delivers services for children and young people at an adequate level. The council is accurate in assessing the quality of its services and has responded positively to the recommendations raised in the JAR. Appropriate progress has been made since that time, in particular in improving aspects of children's social care with regard to safeguarding. The contribution the council makes to improving outcomes with regard to staying safe therefore is now adequate. The council's contribution towards improving outcomes for being healthy, enjoying and achieving and achieving economic well-being remains adequate. However, school improvement services and aspects of health are good. The council's role in enabling children and young people to make a positive contribution was good at the time of the JAR and this continues to be the case. The council is strongly committed to embedding integrated services and improving outcomes for the children and young people of Devon. Leadership of the service is strong and appropriate staff have been recruited to increase the capacity of the senior management team.

Being healthy

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Two recommendations emerged from the JAR.

For action in the next six months

- Health partners should ensure that historical differences in provision across the county are tackled systematically to improve equality of access to health services for all children, young people and families.
- The council and its partners should accelerate the rate of progress towards a fully integrated Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and, as a matter of priority, improve access to services for looked after children and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Constructive work is being undertaken to address the historical differences in provision between areas in a number of aspects, including preventative services, CAMHS, and services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. These are not yet fully resolved and still result in unacceptable variations in outcomes across the county particularly with regard to some therapy and learning disability services. Progress and the pace of change have been hindered by the restructuring of health services. However, the restructuring within the directorate and the relatively recent establishment of the single Primary Care Trust (PCT) has already had a positive impact in taking this work forward more effectively. It has helped the council and the key stakeholders to tackle inequalities more systematically. Examples include initiatives such as the AXS programme which is Devon's model for developing local, frontline, multi-disciplinary, integrated and preventative support around the needs of children and young people in their communities. A further example is the establishment of a joint agency team approach across the county for disabled children and the 'fair shares' formula scheme. Although the AXS programme is still relatively new, there are numerous examples of this approach resulting in good outcomes for families.

The council and its partners have a strong ethos to promote healthy lifestyles with an appropriate emphasis on prevention and early intervention. Health needs, including health inequalities, are known and are linked to service provision with improving outcomes. Access to primary healthcare for groups in traditionally hard-to-reach circumstances is facilitated well and children and young people are generally healthy.

Parents and carers are well supported and, in the majority of areas, rates of smoking during pregnancy and the percentage of babies with low birth weights are decreasing. The rates of mothers initiating breast feeding are improving, as are immunisation rates, which are good and improving. Schools are well engaged in achieving the Healthy Schools standards and good progress has been made, although the percentage of schools participating is lower than that in similar councils.

Overall provision contributes well to the health of young children through good teaching and practical arrangements. Fewer childminders, full day care, crèche and multiple day care settings have actions imposed at the point of registration, than the national average. Inspections show that all sectors have outcomes that, in general, are higher than the national average for health.

The JAR found that staff from different agencies work effectively together to promote healthy lifestyles with a number of schemes provided through youth services, Sure Start and children's centres. Maternity services have been redesigned to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by children's centres, which make services more accessible and closer to home. The Drug Action Team has developed effective links with schools to underpin health promotion and drug and alcohol awareness programmes. Sexual health services are delivered well in a range of youth clubs, community centres and schools by community nurses, GPs and trained youth workers. Joint/multi-agency commissioning has led to examples of excellent service provision, such as timely assessment of, and treatment for, young people with needs related to substance misuse.

Children who are looked after receive a good service from designated, named doctors and nurses. Adopting common strategies and practice, as well as some innovative schemes such as a screening tool for substance misuse, have been positive. In the last year, the proportion of looked after children receiving regular health checks has improved to a very good level. Overall health outcomes for children and young people are improving.

Area(s) for development

- The areas for action which formed the recommendations in the JAR remain the priority for further development.

Staying safe

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Eight recommendations emerged from the JAR.

For immediate action

- The council and its partners should respond to the most urgent safeguarding concerns identified in the report by:
 - establishing appropriate and agreed thresholds for access to child protection and family support services
 - ensuring that criteria are clearly understood and applied consistently in practice by all staff

- establishing clear written procedures to notify contracting officers immediately when child protection concerns arise in agency placements of children looked after by other local authorities
 - ensuring comprehensive management oversight of the decisions and actions arising from multi agency work with individual children.
- In particular, the council should:
- ensure that a written record is kept of all referrals to the social care service to monitor the range and nature of all contacts
 - improve the organisation and management oversight of all social care personnel files by ensuring that:
 - All files show clearly the progress of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), health and identity checks.
 - Clear written procedures inform decision-making for those applicants whose checks reveal offences.
 - Social care staff take up posts only after all checks are completed and a formal contract has been issued.
 - take action to increase financial and professional capacity in the social care service for looked after children, those in need of protection, and children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
 - put in place robust quality assurance arrangements to monitor the frequency, nature and quality of social work visits to looked after children and those on the child protection register.

The immediate actions set out in the JAR report have been acted upon effectively by the council and key stakeholders. There are now appropriate and agreed thresholds for access to child protection and family support services. Outcome data, such as the percentage of referrals leading to initial assessments, indicate that these are achieving the desired results. Since the restructuring of children's services, management systems have been strengthened and are more robust across the directorate's work. This has had a major impact on practice and, therefore, on outcomes for families. There is now rigorous management of the referral and contact systems to ensure threshold criteria are understood and applied consistently. Similarly, managers' oversight of the decisions and actions arising from multi-agency work with individual children has been strengthened.

All children on the child protection register are allocated a social worker and all child protection reviews are held on time. The new referral and assessment arrangements have improved practice in identifying children at risk of significant harm. This is reflected in the increased number of initial child protection conferences held and the number of children with child protection plans. Outcomes for children on the child protection register are improving and are at an acceptable level or better. The council has a good understanding of the issues that need to be tackled, such as eradicating the practice of holding initial child protection conferences without a strategy discussion, and are implementing changes effectively.

Considerable progress is being made to ensure that multi-agency assessments of need, involving children and their families, are undertaken in a timely way to inform support or intervention. In the past, the pace of change has been too slow; recent data show acceleration and this needs to be sustained. The JAR report highlighted a concern that insufficient family support and other preventative services were available for all families who might need them. Work is being undertaken to rectify this and the AXS programme is having a positive impact. Take up of direct payments for families and young people with disabilities are at a good level. The level of re-referrals and reassessments indicates that families are receiving the support they need before cases are closed.

The percentage of looked after children who are allocated a suitably qualified social worker has increased significantly from 76.6% in 2005/06 to 97% in 2006/07. This is now better than the average for England. It has led to the improved timeliness of reviews which is now at a good level, better than the national average. Adoption work and stability of placements for children who are looked after are very good and are contributing to improved outcomes. The judgement of the most recent inspection of fostering services was good.

Devon has an established culture of safeguarding which is evident in the routine work of individual agencies and key partnerships. Relevant agency and inter-agency strategies, policies, procedures and standards are mostly in place and comply with statute and current government guidance. Inadequacies in recruitment arrangements identified by the JAR team were tackled promptly. All services comply with the requirements to detect and deter people who are unsuitable to work with children. The local safeguarding children's board has good representation and covers an appropriate range of subjects. Members of the board recognise that there is more to do in establishing its remit as a body that works alongside and, when appropriate, challenges the Children's Trust. This is underway, as is the development of clear links with other Boards such as Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA).

The high multi-disciplinary profile given to safety issues such as road safety is effective. Devon has exceeded the national target for reducing the numbers of children killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents. The majority of children report feeling safe and that their concerns about these issues are listened and responded to. Views expressed by young people indicate that a slightly higher percentage of young people in Devon feel safer around their local area, when going to school and whilst in school, than the average for England. This includes the risk of being bullied and the effectiveness of schools in dealing with this.

Area(s) for development

- Sustain and build on the improving trends in outcomes, such as the number of and timeliness of initial and core assessments, so that they are in line with similar councils and national averages.

- Take urgent action to eradicate the holding of initial child protection conferences without a strategy discussion.
- Embed the new initiatives and management notes into practice.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. One recommendation emerged from the JAR.

For action in the longer term

- The council, schools and colleges should agree and implement an action plan to improve the attainment and attendance of looked after children and young people.

The authority has responded to the concerns raised in the JAR regarding the attainment and attendance of children in care by establishing a dedicated multi-disciplinary team led by a senior manager. All children and young people are now tracked at school and local authority level and the monitoring of their progress forms part of the annual review in primary schools and School Improvement Partner visits to secondary schools. However, as this work is still relatively new, its impact has yet to be fully demonstrated.

Children receive a good start to their education with 97% of all three- and four-year-olds and almost all children in care attending early years provision. Where Ofsted has inspected it, there is a much better picture than that found nationally. A higher proportion of outstanding judgements than the national average, particularly in teaching, partnership with parents, and leadership and management indicates that settings are of high quality.

An improving trend in attainment at all key stages has been sustained and is mostly above that of similar authorities and the national figures. There have been significant improvements at Key Stage 1 with no fall in standards during 2006, which is against the national trend. Boys' results tend to have risen more than girls', reducing the significant gap in performance, although this still remains. Attainment at Key Stage 2 is good and the proportion of primary schools failing to reach their floor targets is reducing. Key Stage 3 results have exceeded the national trend at Level 5 in three subjects and at the higher levels in mathematics and science. However, results in English declined, against the national trend. Key Stage 4 results also show a steady rise. In line with the national picture, the inclusion of mathematics and English in the figure reduces the percentage by over 10% and, in certain schools, this gap is wider. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve well in special schools and at least satisfactorily in mainstream provision. The rate of progress that children and young people make between key stages is satisfactory. However, the authority has recognised that, in order to improve progress and raise

aspirations above the satisfactory level, schools needed to set more challenging targets for attainment.

Results of the Tellus2 survey showed that the majority of children and young people enjoy school and an overwhelming majority are keen to do their best. This view is supported by school inspection findings. The school improvement service is well led and managed, also providing strong subject support to schools. This is borne out by the proportion of schools placed into a category of concern following inspection, which is lower than nationally. Schools placed in a category or deemed satisfactory have been well supported. In all cases, the authority already knew the barriers to improvement and appropriate action has been taken to bring about sustainable improvement.

Some improvement had taken place in school attendance and it is still broadly in line with national averages. However, absence rates have risen again but improved tracking of data in relation to individual schools and individuals has enabled the authority to identify specific causal links. The numbers of permanent exclusions have risen to the level of previous years from a very low base in 2004/05. This is marginally below the national average, and fixed term exclusions exceed the national figure by 5%. Of particular concern is the high proportion of these children and young people who have a statement of special educational need.

Area(s) for development

- Undertake further and more robust analysis of the data on exclusions, particularly with regard to the high percentage of children and young people with a statement who are excluded from mainstream schools.
- Embed the work of the multi-disciplinary group to improve outcomes for children in care.
- Ensure that targets for attainment set with schools are suitably challenging and aspirational.

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. One recommendation emerged from the JAR.

For action in the next six months

- The Children's Trust should ensure that all vulnerable children and young people who need it have access to an independent advocacy and children's rights service.

Following the JAR, the council established contracts with two independent advocacy schemes. All vulnerable children and young people who need it now have access to

an independent advocacy and children's rights service. Take up of these services is good and increasing.

Devon has a strong, longstanding culture both of seeking children and young people's views and celebrating their achievements. Children and young people in Devon have provided the council and the Tellus2 survey with positive feedback about their views being sought and acted upon. More young people than the national average feel that they are involved in local and school decision-making. A range of initiatives such as Kongamana, an annual celebration event for young people, and the Young People's Shadow Executive, are in place. Traditionally hard-to-reach, vulnerable and other specific groups of children and young people are included in the consultation. Children and young people with complex needs are supported by a range of trained workers, such as those from the Connexions service, to help them to put forward their opinions. The impact of the actions that were put into place to increase children's participation in their review is good with levels rising from 68% in 2005/06 to 89% in 2006/07. The council recognises that this trend needs to continue and recent data show that this is the case.

Information, advice and counselling provision is signposted well and targeted effectively. Services are in place for children needing support at challenging times. The JAR team found that these supported disadvantaged children and young people well. Action taken by schools to reduce bullying and racism is effective and there are widespread and well established mentoring schemes.

A core part of the Children's Trust is multi-agency initiatives, including district councils, Active Devon, leisure services and voluntary organisations to develop positive activities at safe locations. These support children and young people's social and emotional development. Children who are looked after by the council and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well supported through discrete services as well as mainstream provision in schools and the youth services. The number of children accessing funding for a comprehensive range of activities is good and demonstrates a very significant increase; this reflects the effective corporate parenting by the council. Care leavers have experienced an inconsistent service across the county, with too many, in some areas, without pathway plans. The JAR team found a similar inconsistency of services and support for young carers, with many receiving an excellent service whilst others got very little. The council recognised that this was a problem and plans are being implemented to meet the shortfalls.

Devon has secured a reasonable reduction in re-offending rates overall. This has been achieved mainly in the pre-court cohort, through effective work in partnership with the Safer Devon Partnership and an intelligence-led approach to identifying hot spots of lower level youth crime. A variety of multi-agency approaches has been employed effectively to target these areas. For example, the Youth Inclusion Project in Barnstaple, the area with the highest concentration of youth crime and anti-social behaviour in Devon, has produced speedy and substantial reductions in youth crime and anti-social behaviour. There has also been a good reduction (from 3.2% to

2.8%) in the number of children who are looked after being subject to a reprimand, final warning or conviction. Performance is now in line with the average for England and similar authorities. Less progress has been made with the court and custody cohorts who remain a challenging group. Discussions are underway about whether thresholds for services for these young people require adjustment.

Area(s) for development

- Continue to improve the participation of looked after children in their reviews.
- Improve services for care leavers so they all have pathway plans and personal advisers.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Two recommendations emerged from the JAR.

For action in the next six months

- The council and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) should accelerate the rate of progress in the implementation of the 14–19 strategy and ensure that all key partners are fully engaged.

For action in the longer term

- The council, the district councils and partners should improve access to an adequate range of semi-independent and affordable housing with a priority on vulnerable young people.

A clear 14–19 strategy was published in 2005/06, which offers a blend of forward thinking and vision with practical planning for day to day issues. It has since been updated and is reviewed annually by a group which includes the local LSC, the Connexions service, training providers and employers and is chaired by the council's Chief Executive. Area partnerships in geographical sub areas of Devon also exist, but their effectiveness is mixed. The appointment of an experienced consultant to lead and accelerate progress on the strategy is a positive step which is beginning to make an impact at a strategic level.

A curriculum plan and entitlement for learners are outlined in the 14–19 action plan. As a result, recognising the fluidity of learners across the area, a prospectus is available electronically in partnership with Torbay local authority. The challenge is to make 14–19 provision available and viable in an area with rural needs and largely urban provision and where accessibility through lack of transport is a major issue. Young people identified transport as a substantial barrier in their responses to the Tellus2 survey. Considerable funds and much effort have been put into developing innovative options with transport and further possibilities are to be explored, such as

video link technology. Devon was successful in securing only two diploma lines for 2008 in information and communication technology, and creative and media. Although this was a disappointment and is unlikely to meet the needs of the local labour market, these diplomas represent strengths in provision. Guidelines have been written to strengthen the quality of future bids but have yet to be tested. Achievement at both Levels 2 and 3 at age 19 have improved in line with statistical neighbours and the completion rates for apprenticeships have improved significantly from 42.9% in 2004/05 to 58.3% in 2005/06. However, a significant minority of young people are in jobs without training, although the most recent figures indicate that this number has started to decline. Overall, the percentage of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) is below the national average. The good support provided by the Connexions service means that a smaller than expected percentage of young people is unaccounted for. The percentage of young people leaving care who engage in employment, education and training is consistently very good.

An integrated youth and housing strategy group has been established to tackle issues raised by the JAR. As a result, there has been some welcome investment in housing. Peripatetic support workers are cost effective in their work with homeless young people and are delivering beyond their predicted capacity.

Area(s) for development

- Consolidate partnership and area group working to achieve more equitable access to provision for young people across the county, improved transport or alternative opportunities, and diploma submissions which meet the required standard for approval.

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

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is adequate, and its management of these services is adequate. Six recommendations emerged from the JAR.

For immediate action

- The council and its partners should take action to improve multi-agency provision of services for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, to tackle the delays and deficiencies identified in the report and to strengthen transition arrangements from child to adult social care and health services.

For action in the next six months

- The council and its partners should improve the management of children and young people's services by:
 - developing a shared approach to performance management to raise awareness and achievement of joint priorities and outcomes
 - agreeing challenging, measurable and explicit performance targets that better match the ambitions of the area, particularly in relation to the educational achievement of children and young people
 - ensuring that performance monitoring, the collection and use of data and quality assurance procedures are robust
 - agreeing the resources and responsibilities required for delivery of the CYPP to assure accountability for improving services.

For action in the longer term

- The Children's Trust should ensure that all lessons learned from pilot projects, local initiatives and improvement programmes are shared widely and inform the development of good practice across the county.

At the time of the JAR, the Children's Directorate was but a few days old, since which time the council has been consistent in its drive to make the integrated services of the Children's Directorate a reality.

There are now robust, systematic and well documented means for managing performance. The council recognises that further work is needed to ensure that this is embedded in practice at all levels and not just that of senior managers. Systems now exist to enable data to be interrogated based on sound understanding and in response to appropriately posed questions. The result is that solutions are appropriate, practical and lead to the desired outcomes. Although these systems are in place, they have yet to demonstrate a consistently sustained impact.

An inability to find the balance between being responsive to local needs and achieving consistency across the county accounted for many of the weaknesses previously identified in children's social care. The appointment of an interim assistant director for children's social care is positive. He is bringing economies of expertise and uniformity to the quality of delivery and processes within each team. This has been alongside a new structure based on function rather than locality, although still focused on local needs. The approach to establishing this local yet unified structure has been evolutionary. It would appear that this is an appropriate strategy to maintain stability and ensure that an understanding of equity is in place. The council is committed to building on firm foundations and getting it right from the start, so that good practice can be embedded.

Performance in aspects of education remains good. The council has used best practice in education to improve processes across the children's service. However, the flow has been two way. The use of performance boards, previously a social care process, has focused groups on specific areas of concern across the directorate. For example the budget for out-of-county residential school placements was considered excessive. Action has been taken and plans and performance management procedures have been put in place by the performance board to bring about improvement.

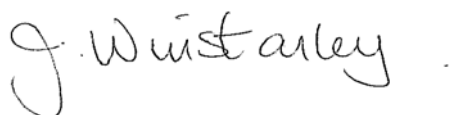
Overall, the council has demonstrated adequate progress in meeting the recommendations of the JAR, and has shown adequate capacity to maintain and improve further its services for children and young people.

Area for development(s)

- Embed fully the procedures and monitoring and evaluating processes which have been put in place since forming the directorate and since the JAR, especially regarding the assessment of impact on outcomes.

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