

9 December 2010

Ms Pauline Pilkington
Executive Director for Children's Services
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
Room 39, The Council House
Lichfield Street
Walsall WS1 1TW

Dear Ms Pilkington

Annual children's services assessment

Ofsted guidance published in July 2010 explains that the annual assessment of children's services is derived from the performance profile of the quality of services and outcomes for children and young people in each local area. This performance profile includes findings from across Ofsted's inspection and regulation of services and settings for which the local authority has strategic or operational responsibilities, either alone or in partnership with others, together with data from the relevant indicators in the National Indicator Set (NIS).

In reaching the assessment of children's services, Ofsted has taken account of all inspected and regulated services for children and young people, arrangements for making sure children are safe and stay safe and performance against national measures. More weight has been given to the outcomes of Ofsted's inspections and regulatory visits (Blocks A and B in the performance profile).

The annual assessment derives from a four point scale:

4	Performs excellently	An organisation that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
3	Performs well	An organisation that exceeds minimum requirements
2	Performs adequately	An organisation that meets only minimum requirements
1	Performs poorly	An organisation that does not meet minimum requirements

Within each level there will be differing standards of provision. For example, an assessment of 'performs excellently' does not mean all aspects of provision are perfect. Similarly, an assessment of 'performs poorly' does not mean there are no adequate or even good aspects. As in 2009, while the performance profile remains central to Ofsted's assessment, meeting or not meeting the minimum requirements alone does not define the grade. The assessment has involved the application of inspector judgement.

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs adequately (2)
---------------------------------------	--------------------------------

Children's services in Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council perform adequately, as they did in 2009.

The majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. Education and care provision for very young children have improved since last year; two-thirds of settings are good or better and around a third are satisfactory. All seven special schools are good or outstanding and sixth form provision in three of these schools is also good or better. The picture for primary and secondary schools is less positive, with only a half of primary schools and just over a third of secondary schools judged to be good or better at their most recent inspection. Three secondary schools and two primary schools were judged to be inadequate during the academic year 2009/2010. Provision in the further education college is good but only a third of school sixth forms are good or better. One of the two pupil referral units is outstanding and the other adequate. The local authority adoption service has improved and was recently judged to be good. The local authority fostering service is adequate. Four of the five local authority children's homes are good or better.

A recent unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found a number of strengths and areas for development and no areas for priority action. Private fostering arrangements were judged inadequate at their most recent full inspection.

National performance measures show the vast majority of all outcomes, including those for educational attainment and progress, are in line with the averages for England or for similar areas, although relatively few are above. Results in national tests show that at the age of 11 and 16 children and young people generally do as well as their peers in similar areas. The number of primary and secondary schools not meeting minimum standards of performance has reduced steadily over the last five years, although there was a slight rise in the number of primary schools which did not meet minimum standards in 2008/2009. Obesity levels for children at the age of 11 are higher than in similar areas.

Key areas for further development

- Increase the number of primary and secondary schools which are good or better.
- Continue to raise standards at the age of 11, 16 and 19.
- Reduce the number of 11-year-olds who are obese.

Outcomes for children and young people

The very large majority of settings and services give good support to young people to lead healthy lives. Most health outcomes are in line with those in similar areas or nationally. However, breast-feeding rates at six to eight weeks from birth are not as good as similar areas. The take-up of school lunches in primary schools is lower than in similar areas, but is similar to the national average. Obesity rates for children in the Reception Year at primary school have fallen and are now around the average for similar local authorities, but at the age of 11 the proportion of children who are obese is above average. Children's level of participation in physical activity and sport has continued to rise in line with the national trend and is similar to that elsewhere. Progress in moving towards a comprehensive child and adolescent mental health service is in line with the rest of the country and remains a priority for the local partnership.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are good in the majority of settings and services. When measured against national indicators, Walsall's performance is consistently in line with performance nationally or in similar areas. The number of children and young people seriously injured or killed on the roads is reducing at a similar rate to England as a whole and hospital admissions for unintentional or deliberate injuries are lower than in similar areas. The local authority has a well co-ordinated approach to tackling incidents of racism and bullying. There is good access to early support for families. Child protection enquiries are completed satisfactorily and risks to children identified. Staff, including newly qualified social workers, receive regular and effective supervision from senior managers. For the children whose need is greatest, child protection plans are reviewed on time and the number in place for over two years is average. The stability of placements for children in care has improved in the last year: children move less frequently and stay longer in their placements than the national average.

Child carers, nurseries, special schools and the large further education college are successful in helping children to enjoy and achieve. However, the provision in primary and secondary schools is more variable, with only a half of primary schools and two-fifths of secondary schools judged to be good or better, and a recent increase in the number of inadequate primary and secondary schools. Educational outcomes overall have continued to rise and are now in line with the averages for similar areas for children and young people aged five, 11 and 16. Over the last four years the number of primary and secondary schools which fail to meet minimum standards of performance has fallen and the gap between the highest and lowest achieving children has reduced faster than the national rate. The pattern of achievement for minority ethnic groups is generally in line with that for similar areas and nationally. The proportion of secondary schools where behaviour is good or better is broadly in line with similar parts of the country. Persistent absence rates continue to reduce at a similar rate to the rest of the country.

Children and young people are supported well to make a positive contribution to services through well-developed consultation mechanisms which enable them to make an effective impact; for example their contribution to the anti-bullying strategy.

The rate of reduction in the under-18 conception rate is similar to the England average. Fewer young people than in similar areas say that they have been drunk or taken drugs recently. The rate of permanent exclusions from schools fluctuates year-on-year and is broadly in line with similar areas and the rate found nationally. Fewer young people in Walsall re-offend than in similar areas, and they are well supported by the youth offending team.

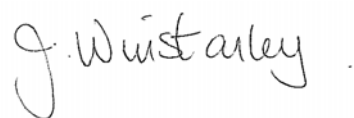
Young people are supported generally well across services and settings in developing the skills and attitudes required for securing work and achieving economic well-being, though this is weaker in school sixth forms. The proportion of young people not in education, training or work has reduced slightly over the last five years and is now in line with similar areas and that found nationally. The proportion of care leavers who continue into education, training or work has fallen and is now broadly in line with the national average after good performance in previous years. The proportion of young people gaining five good GCSEs by the age of 19 improved again in 2009 and is now in line with the averages for similar areas. Similarly, the proportion gaining two A levels or their equivalent by the age of 19 has also gone up and is just slightly below that for similar areas. The proportion of young people from low-income families who progress to higher education is similar to that across the country. The take-up of formal childcare by low-income families was below the national average in 2007/2008. The local authority reports that take-up is improving.

Prospects for improvement

Outcomes for children and young people in Walsall continue to get better. Whereas previously, performance was low compared to similar local authorities, there has been very steady improvement in the last five years which has successfully brought it close to the averages for similar areas. Unvalidated figures for educational performance in 2009/2010 confirm this trend. However, too much provision in primary schools, secondary schools and post-16 settings is not yet consistently of a good quality. The Walsall Children and Young People's Plan focuses well on key areas for improvement, based on a good analysis of need. The local authority is clear about its priorities and has rightly targeted its work at improving educational achievement and meeting government targets. It has put in place plans to make improvements to front-line child protection arrangements following its recent inspection and is providing satisfactory support and challenge to the schools recently found to be inadequate.

This children's services assessment is provided in accordance with section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small flourish at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment