

9 December 2010

Mrs Susan Richardson
Director of Children and Young People's Services
St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council
Atlas House, Corporation Street
St Helens, Merseyside
WA9 1LD

Dear Mrs Richardson

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.

St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs well (3)
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Children's services in St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council continue to perform well.

The large majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. Most nursery and primary schools are good or better but two primary schools are inadequate. This is the only inadequate provision. After the age of 16, provision is of a generally high standard: the sixth form college is outstanding, and the general further education college and three of the five secondary sixth forms are good. Special schools and the two pupil referral units are also of a good standard, with only one maintained special school being satisfactory. Too many settings in early years and childcare and half of the ten secondary schools are only satisfactory. The local authority fostering and adoption arrangements are good. Three children's homes are managed by the local authority, one being good and two satisfactory. Of the remaining 20 children's homes managed by the private and voluntary sector, all but two are good or better. Those private homes which are used by the local authority are good with the exception of one which is satisfactory. Nearly all settings do well at helping children and young people enjoy school and achieve well and most are successful in keeping them safe.

An unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found a number of strengths, some areas for development and no priority actions. The local authority's work to identify and monitor children in private fostering arrangements is satisfactory.

National performance measures show most outcomes to be in line with or above the averages for England or for similar areas as are all of the educational attainment and progress indicators. Good outcomes have been sustained and some have improved. Children in early years settings do better than the average in similar areas. Results in national tests are also above average for all 11-year-olds, including children from low-income families, and these standards have been sustained in the most recent results. Standards at the age of 16 continue to improve and are now in line with similar areas; however, young people from low-income families do not do as well as their peers and the gap between this group and the rest is getting wider.

Key areas for further development

- Improve the quality of early years and childcare provision so that more is good or better.
- Improve attainment for those 16-year-olds from low-income families.
- Improve secondary schools so that more are good or better.

Outcomes for children and young people

Local arrangements to encourage children and young people to live healthy lives are almost always successful. Nearly all settings are good at this, although some childminder and day care settings are only satisfactory. Many children and young people, including those who are looked after by the local authority, enjoy good relationships with their peers, family and friends, and the percentage of children who are physically active and involved in sports is higher than in similar areas. Findings from a recent survey of children found satisfaction with parks and play areas to be lower than elsewhere and in response the local authority has invested significant new resources to improve these facilities. Fewer women breast-feed than elsewhere in the country and this has been identified by St Helens as a local priority for improvement. The numbers of children who are very overweight by the time they start school is much higher than elsewhere although by the time children are 11-years-old there is some improvement. More young women under the age of 18 become pregnant than elsewhere and this is a concern for the local authority and its partners. A good range of sexual health services is now available to young people but are too recent to judge success.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are good or better in nearly all settings, with the exception of some childminder settings and two of the local authority's children's homes which are satisfactory. The two secure children homes, one of which is managed by the local authority, are good, as are the local fostering and adoption arrangements. Care agencies work well together to keep children safe and protect them from risk of harm. The percentage of children who say they have been bullied is lower than in similar areas and there are good systems in place for reporting when bullying occurs. However, more children and young people are admitted to hospital as a result of unintentional or deliberate injuries in comparison to elsewhere. A recent inspection of front-line child protection services found a number of strengths including increased resources to improve capacity, good managerial support to fieldwork staff and effective systems to ensure high quality and timely data. Some weaknesses were observed; for example, a high turnover of social work staff and managers in front line services meant poor continuity of support, caseloads were very high for some staff, and the quality of initial and core assessments was inconsistent. Local children in need data confirm a shift downwards from a high level in the number of core assessments completed on time and a rise in the number of children becoming subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time.

The large majority of settings and services are good at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning. However, there is too much satisfactory provision in secondary schools and some childcare settings. The local authority is good at helping schools get better and one of the two inadequate primary schools is now making good progress. Most children do as well, if not better than their peers in similar areas and standards have been sustained. By the age of 16, increasing numbers of young people gain five or more good GCSEs but, while the picture is an improving one, standards are not improving fast enough for those young people from low-income families. At the ages of 11 and 16, children and young people with

special educational needs do particularly well in comparison to their peers elsewhere. Behaviour is good in the majority of secondary schools but the number of secondary pupils who are often absent from school is higher than similar areas and this continues to be a key challenge for the local authority.

Almost all schools and other settings are good at involving children and young people in decision making and activities in their communities. The consultation, participation and engagement strategy has well-established arrangements for involving children and young people in planning and reviewing local services, including those who are looked after by the local authority and those with special educational needs. This work continues to be a strong feature of the local authority and its partners. The number of young people re-offending in St Helens is in line with similar areas and by most measures the youth offending service performs adequately.

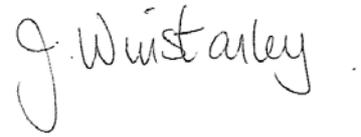
The steady reduction in the number of young people not in education, work or training and the gradual increase in 17-year-olds remaining in learning shows that the local authority and its partners have been successful in developing good opportunities for this group. Recent developments include apprenticeship programmes in motor vehicle studies and in hairdressing. Care leavers also have some success in finding appropriate training or work, although the percentage finding work or training has dropped in 2009–2010. All are helped to find suitable accommodation when they leave care. Good progress is being made in helping 19-year-olds, including those from low-income families, to achieve good GCSEs or equivalent qualifications.

Prospects for improvement

Children's services performed well in 2009 and continue to do so. Outcomes for children and young people are good. The local authority's review of its Children and Young People's Plan shows good progress in many areas and focuses well on areas that need to improve. The local authority provides effective support to help weaker schools improve but there are still too many secondary schools that are only satisfactory. Additional resources have been made available to tackle health issues such as reducing obesity levels in children and to improve play areas. Improving the achievement of all 16-year-olds is a key priority, as is reducing the poor school attendance. While achieving some success, the local authority is aware that there is still much to be done. A new plan has been introduced to curb the disappointing increase in the pregnancy rates for those under the age of 18. The recent inspection of front-line child protection services found good management systems and a comprehensive audit of safeguarding that has led to increased staffing. The local authority has taken a number of steps to address areas for development such as the high staff turnover in frontline services.

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 period at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment