

9 December 2010

Ms Barbara Peacock
Executive Director for Children and Families
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
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Dear Ms Peacock

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.

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs poorly (1)
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Children's services in Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council perform poorly. In 2009, a transitional year, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council was assessed as performing adequately. However, in 2010 the quality of safeguarding services for children was judged to be inadequate, and many settings and services for children and young people remain only satisfactory or inadequate.

A full inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services published in January 2010 found that services to safeguard children and young people in Sandwell were inadequate, with many weaknesses in front-line social work practice and in the management of social care services. Although the local authority took action to tackle the serious weaknesses in safeguarding highlighted in the joint area review of children's services in 2006, improvements were not sustained or consolidated.

The minority of all services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. While the majority of childminder and childcare settings are good, three non-domestic childcare settings are currently inadequate. Most nursery schools and early years provision in primary schools are good as are three of the local authority's four maintained special schools. The majority of the rest of the provision is satisfactory with some inadequate settings. Just over half of the local authority's primary schools are now good or better; however five primary schools have been judged to be inadequate during the academic year 2009/2010. Secondary school performance remains poor, with only a third judged good or better at their most recent inspection and one secondary academy judged inadequate. Two of the local authority's seven pupil referral units are inadequate. The local authority adoption service is satisfactory as is the one local authority children's home. However, both the fostering and private fostering services are inadequate.

National performance measures show a large majority of outcomes are in line with the averages for England or for similar areas, and some outcomes are better than elsewhere. The educational achievement of children in care at the age of 11 is better than in similar areas. However, there remain some significant areas where Sandwell performs below average, notably in health and education. Despite a marked improvement in 2009, educational standards at the age of 16 still lag behind those in similar areas and persistent absence in secondary schools remains high. The percentage of young people not in education, work or training is higher than in similar areas and fewer young people achieve five higher grade GCSE passes or their equivalent at the age of 19 than in similar local authorities.

Key areas for further development

- Improve the quality of safeguarding for children and young people.
- Increase the proportion of secondary schools and pupil referral units which are good or better.
- Increase the proportion of young people achieving a qualification equivalent to five good GCSEs or two A levels at the ages of 16 and 19.
- Increase the participation in education and training of 16- to 18-year-olds.
- Reduce health inequalities.

Outcomes for children and young people

Local arrangements to encourage children and young people to live healthy lives are adequate, but do not yet make sufficient impact. Healthy lifestyles are promoted adequately in inspected settings and services and local targets in relation to the Healthy Schools programme were met in 2008. However, performance against many indicators is variable with limited progress. The number of mothers still breast-feeding at six to eight weeks from birth is below that in similar areas and nationally and locally set targets are very challenging; new initiatives to encourage breast-feeding have been introduced. Obesity levels for children at the start of primary school and at the age of 11 have risen and are higher than those for similar areas. Children and young people's participation in physical education and sport is increasing in line with similar areas and nationally and young people say that they are satisfied with the parks and play areas provided for them. Children and young people's emotional health compares favourably with the national picture and the effectiveness of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services is in line with similar areas but less good than across England.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are inadequate. The inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services published in January 2010 found significant weaknesses in front-line practice and management. Although most cases of children deemed to be at immediate risk of physical harm are followed up quickly, the response to other referrals is inconsistent. Performance management arrangements are not consistently applied, case recording is of poor quality which does not focus sufficiently on risk and the views of children are not routinely sought or fully recorded. The services for children in care are adequate. The stability of placements for children in care is good and the outcomes for children who are placed for adoption have improved, though some still experience too many moves. However, a very recent inspection found safeguarding in the fostering service to be inadequate. Safeguarding arrangements are good or better in the large majority of maintained schools in Sandwell and there has been good progress in reducing bullying.

Sandwell has fewer good or better early years providers, schools or colleges than similar local authorities and nationally. Standards of educational achievement are rising, though remain lower than in similar areas, especially for higher grade GCSEs at the age of 16. At the end of the Reception year achievement is in line with that in similar areas. By the end of primary school achievement is still comparable to that in similar areas, but by the end of compulsory secondary education at the age of 16 achievement is below the England average and the average for similar areas. Sandwell has been successful in reducing the number of secondary schools performing below minimum standards but the number of primary schools not meeting minimum standards rose again in 2009. Standards of behaviour and absence rates in secondary schools are worse than in similar areas.

Most schools and other settings are good at involving children and young people in decision-making and their local community. Children and young people are supported in making a positive contribution and influencing what happens in the borough, including the 14-19 strategy and the future of residential centres. Children in care have some good opportunities to comment on issues that affect them, but the information gleaned is not always used systematically to develop and improve strategy and provision. The number of young people who offend for the first time is in line with similar areas and fewer young people go on to re-offend than is the case nationally. The Youth Justice Board has judged that the youth offending service is performing excellently against national indicators with good capacity and capability to sustain and improve performance. It has praised the Sandwell Positive Aspiration Programme for providing excellent challenge and support to high risk and vulnerable young people. The rate of teenage conceptions has reduced faster than nationally and this continues to be a priority area of work for the local authority.

Indicators show that fewer low-income working families take up formal childcare than in similar areas though numbers are gradually increasing. While the participation in education or training at the age of 17 is satisfactory, the number of 16- to 18-year-olds not in education, training or work, though reducing, remains higher than in similar areas. Fewer young people gain five higher level GCSE passes by the age of 19 than in similar areas, while numbers achieving two A level passes or their equivalent by the age of 19 are also lower than in similar areas. The most recent data show that the proportion of young people from low-income families progressing to higher education is better than in similar local authorities.

Prospects for improvement

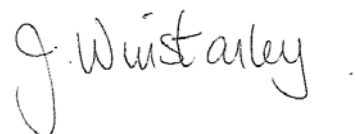
The borough faces significant challenges in terms of prioritisation, planning and resourcing if it is to make the necessary improvements to services for children and young people. A new director of children's services took up post in August 2010, after an extended period of interim leadership arrangements.

The Children and Young People's Thematic Partnership Plan for Sandwell is aspirational, focusing strongly on improving outcomes for children and young people in the borough. The plan highlights the under-achievement in the borough, identifies a very significant number of areas for action and sets very challenging improvement

targets in order to 'close the gap'. Some educational outcomes for children and young people are already improving, for example achievement in the early years, and progress between Key Stages 1 and 2. However, even for these indicators none of the targets for the current year has been met. Standards at the age of 16, while still low, rose significantly in 2009 and provisional figures for 2010 show that this trend of improvement continues. In the last 12 months seven schools have been placed in an Ofsted category of concern. While safeguarding arrangements are good or better in the large majority of maintained schools in Sandwell, the recent safeguarding inspection judged the local authority's capacity to improve as inadequate, identifying weaknesses in quality assurance arrangements, a lack of defined relationship between the Local Safeguarding Children Board and the Children's Trust, and insufficient staffing capacity. The local authority responded promptly to the outcomes of the inspection and the ensuing Improvement Notice, drawing up an improvement plan and establishing an independent chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board. However, it is as yet too soon to judge the impact on outcomes for children and young people.

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 large initial 'J'.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment