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Ms Gail Quinton
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Ms Quinton

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.

Worcestershire County Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs poorly (1)
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Children's services in Worcestershire County Council perform poorly. This is because the most recent inspection of safeguarding arrangements has reported that services are inadequate with weaknesses identified in inconsistent performance, unclear thresholds for referral, and ineffective performance management and assurance. Services for looked after children are adequate as are private fostering arrangements.

The large majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. Provision in early years settings is generally good or better. Although the majority of primary and secondary schools were judged to be good or better at their most recent inspection, one in four secondary schools remain only satisfactory. Two primary schools and two secondary schools are inadequate. Five of the local authority special schools are good, four adequate and one inadequate. Seven of the nine pupil referral units in the county are good or better and none is inadequate. Provision for 16- to 19-year-olds is more variable. While almost all post-16 colleges are good, around a half of the county's school sixth forms are only adequate. The local authority adoption service is good and the fostering service is adequate. All six local authority children's homes are good or better.

National performance measures show the very large majority of outcomes are in line with the averages for England and for similar areas. Results in national educational tests are close to the average for similar areas for 11-year-olds and at the age of 19, but below those in similar areas at the age of 16, though recent data for 2010 show improvement. Children's educational standards at the end of the Reception Year in primary school remain below those in similar areas.

Key areas for further development

- Take action to implement the recommendations of the recent inspection of safeguarding services.
- Increase the number of good or better secondary schools.
- Increase the number of good or better school sixth forms.
- Improve children's educational standards at the end of the Reception Year in primary school.

Outcomes for children and young people

Provision to support children and young people in leading healthy lives is good in the large majority of inspected services and settings. Health outcomes are generally in line with those in similar areas and nationally. The take-up of school lunches in

primary and secondary schools is comparable to that in similar areas. The proportion of children who are obese is in line with those in similar areas and children's level of participation in high quality physical activity and sport is better than nationally. A recent national survey showed that children and young people judge their emotional health to be better than in similar areas, though recent data show that progress in moving towards a comprehensive child and adolescent mental health service has been slower than that elsewhere in England. Health outcomes for looked after children are good and are well documented.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are inadequate overall. The recent inspection of safeguarding services found that performance was inconsistent and that the protection needs of some children are not assured. Thresholds for referral to social care prior to children being identified at risk are unclear for some professionals and concerns about some children are not sufficiently assessed or tackled. However, once children are identified as being at risk of significant harm, joint-agency work is generally effective. Safeguarding arrangements are judged to be at least adequate in almost all inspected settings and services. The number of children and young people seriously injured or killed on the roads is reducing at a comparable rate to similar areas and hospital admissions for unintentional or deliberate injuries are at a level broadly similar to the national picture. In a recent survey the proportion of children and young people who reported that they had experienced bullying was slightly above that nationally. Services for looked after children are adequate overall, though case planning, reviews and recording are inadequate.

The very large majority of inspected services and settings are good at helping children and young people to enjoy and achieve well in their education. The proportion of early years settings judged good or better in inspection is higher than in similar areas and nationally. However, at the end of the Reception Year in primary schools children's attainment is lower than that in similar areas. Although children's progress between the ages of seven and 11 is slower than in similar areas, children's achievement has improved to be in line with that in similar areas by the end of their primary education. Performance across primary schools varies with nine primary schools achieving below minimum standards in 2009. By the end of secondary education young people's achievement has remained below that in similar areas, though provisional results for 2010 show that outcomes have begun to improve. The performance of secondary schools is variable, with over a third judged to be only adequate in their most recent inspection. However, the number of inadequate secondary schools has reduced in the last year from four to two. A more concerted focus on the educational outcomes for looked after children has led to improved results but the gap between the educational achievements of this group and their peers remains wide. In three-quarters of secondary schools behaviour is judged to be good or outstanding and is comparable to performance in similar areas and nationally. Persistent absence rates are reducing in line with performance in similar local authorities.

Most children and young people, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those who are looked after are supported well to make a contribution to services through consultation and participation. However, although members of the children in care council say that they feel listened to, most children in care do not contribute directly to the work of the local authority. The proportion of young people involved in sport, cultural, recreational and volunteering activities is broadly in line to that in similar areas and nationally. The rate of reduction in the under-18 conception rate is similar to the England average. Rates of permanent exclusions from schools are broadly in line with similar areas and nationally. Re-offending by young people in Worcestershire is comparable with similar areas, and by most measures the youth offending service works well. The advocacy service and inter-agency work for looked after children have contributed to a reduction of looked after children entering the youth justice system, especially those in children's homes.

The very large majority of inspected settings and services are successful in helping young people prepare for adult life. The quality of educational provision in further education settings is good, though that in school sixth forms is more variable. The proportion of young people in education, employment or work is in line with similar areas, but too many care leavers do not continue into education, training or work and not enough support is targeted at those who are hard to reach. The proportion of young people who gain five higher grade GCSE passes or two A level passes or equivalent by the age of 19 is in line with similar local authorities. The proportion of young people from low-income backgrounds who achieve qualifications is about average. The take-up of formal childcare by low-income families is similar to the national average. Transition planning for disabled young people into adult social care services is inadequate as assessments for adult services are started too late and not always completed by the time the young person reaches the age of 18.

Prospects for improvement

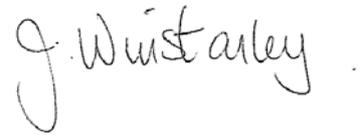
Outcomes for children and young people in Worcestershire are generally in line with those in similar parts of the country. While there are strengths in a number of areas, notably early years provision and children's homes, the local authority has recognised where improvement is needed. It has been successful in reducing the number of inadequate secondary schools, in tackling underperformance at the age of 16 and increasing the focus on the educational achievement of looked after children. The local authority's Children and Young People's Plan 2008-11 demonstrates clear objectives and high ambition.

The capacity for improvement of safeguarding and looked after children's services is adequate. Local authority managers and elected members acted promptly to tackle deteriorating performance in safeguarding services through the 'Next Steps' programme. Following external audit and inspection, further actions have been introduced to improve the capacity, organisation, accessibility and quality assurance across social care services. There are already some signs of impact, though many developments are still at an early stage of implementation. Partnership working with other agencies is often good with effective commissioning arrangements for looked

after children. However, quality assurance arrangements have not yet led to a sustained improvement in outcomes.

The 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