

9 December 2010

Ms Jo Olsson
Director of Children Education and Families
Thurrock Council
Civic Offices, New Road
Grays
Essex RM17 6SL

Dear Ms Olsson

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.

Thurrock Council children's services assessment 2010

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

Children's services in Thurrock Council continue to perform adequately.

A minority of all types of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. A large majority of childcare provision is good, but the number of good childminders remains below average and there has been a small increase in the number of childminders that are inadequate since last year. One third of primary schools are good, which is a very low proportion. No primary school in the borough is outstanding and two are providing an inadequate standard of education. An average proportion of secondary schools are good and one, which had been in special measures, is now providing a satisfactory standard of education. Post-16 provision in the borough is outstanding if it is provided by the sixth form college, but adequate if provided by the further education college which has re-opened as the Learning Campus. Both special schools are outstanding; however, the pupil referral unit is now inadequate. Frequent staff changes have resulted in a failure of leaders and managers to bring about necessary improvements. The local fostering and adoption agencies are adequate.

A recent unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found several areas of strength and that the areas of development identified in the previous inspection in November 2009 have been addressed, but have not been fully resolved.

National performance measures show a large majority are in line or above the average for England or for similar areas. Obesity levels among five-year-olds, although beginning to fall, remain high and too many young people are offending for the first time. The education achievement of very young children and standards for 11-year-olds and 19-year-olds remain very low. Nevertheless, examination results for 16- and 19-year-olds improved significantly in 2009. Children and young people from lower income families do not do as well as those from similar backgrounds across the country at any stage in their education.

Key areas for further development

- Improve primary schools so that more are good or better.
- Improve the attainment of very young children and 11-year-olds.
- Sustain the improvement in the achievement of 16- and 19-year-olds.
- Improve the achievement of children and young people from lower-income families and those with special educational needs.
- Reduce the number of first-time offenders.

Outcomes for children and young people

Healthy lifestyles are promoted strongly especially within educational settings, but some childminders, the pupil referral unit and the local fostering agency are not good in this area. Further progress has been made in the development of effective services for children and young people with emotional and mental health difficulties. In recent surveys the number of children and young people reporting good emotional health is much higher than in the rest of England. The local authority knows obesity among children aged five and 11 remains too high and is not being reduced quickly enough. This is a key priority for improvement. Local knowledge about whether babies aged six to eight weeks are still being breast-fed, though improving, is very low compared to the rest of England. Levels of satisfaction with local services by parents of disabled children are well below average.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are largely good as confirmed by Ofsted inspections of schools and colleges. However, in the pupil referral unit and in the local fostering and adoption agencies provision is satisfactory in this respect. The Local Safeguarding Children Board's self-assessment identified the information it has about children who have run away from home or care and the policies and procedures in place to deal with them, is not as good as in other authorities. An unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services in November 2010 found effective use is made by the local authority of a wide range of services provided by the voluntary sector to meet the needs of vulnerable children and their families. However, safeguarding thresholds are not consistently adhered to by all referring agencies, resulting in some unnecessary referrals. Referral information provided by partner agencies is not of a consistently good quality. This particularly relates to notifications of incidents involving domestic violence. There is still no effective agreement between partner agencies to screen and consider the most effective response to incidents of domestic abuse. Arrangements for community safety are strong. For example, relatively few children are admitted to hospital as the result of accidental or deliberate injuries. Low numbers of children are killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents.

Inspections show institutions and settings have variable success in helping children and young people do well and enjoy their learning. Not enough childminders and primary schools in Thurrock are good in this area. Improvements to the standards very young children achieve in 2008 were not sustained in 2009, when they fell to be much lower than in similar areas again. Test results for 11-year-olds are too low and improving only slowly. Seven primary schools did not reach minimum expected standards in 2009 and there has been little change to this number in recent years. In contrast, examination results for 16-year-olds improved by a larger than average amount in 2009. Only one school failed to reach the minimum expected standards, whereas in 2008 there were four schools in this category. The local authority has now closed this school and it has reopened as an academy. However, young people with special educational needs do not achieve well in secondary schools and the difference in their achievement and that of their peers is getting wider.

Most schools and other settings are good at involving young people in decision making and activity in their community, but not enough childminders are good, nor is the pupil referral unit. Local services continue to be very effective in reducing the number of young women under the age of 18 who become pregnant. More 16-year-olds report they have recently been drunk or taken drugs than in similar areas and fewer than average take part in organised activities. By most measures the youth offending service performs adequately. Re-offending rates remain much better than in similar areas, but comparatively high numbers of young people offend for the first time. There has been a big improvement in how many young offenders receive a custodial sentence, but not enough take part in education or training.

The local authority knows that not enough 19-year-olds in Thurrock are obtaining qualifications and too few are progressing to higher education. While the achievement of 19-year-olds remains well below that in similar areas, the rate of improvement has been faster in the last two years, so the gap is narrowing. The local authority and its partners are working together to improve the range of education and training opportunities in the borough. However, they are not being successful in persuading more 17-year-olds to take advantage of them.

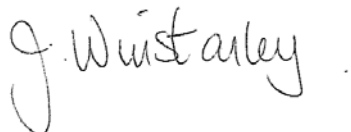
Prospects for improvement

The majority of outcomes for children and young people in Thurrock are improving. However, some key educational outcomes have either not improved or are improving only slowly, as is the overall quality of provision. The local authority in its Children and Young People's Plan demonstrates it knows what it needs to improve. Local partners have shown continuing success in reducing the number of teenage pregnancies. However, obesity levels remain high and more young people are offending for the first time. The local authority recognises the quality of leadership and management in its primary schools is a serious challenge to bringing about the necessary rapid improvements in the quality of provision. Ofsted monitoring visits to weaker schools show the local authority has provided generally good support to schools to help them get better. However, the support and challenge provided to the pupil referral unit was not enough to prevent it being judged inadequate in its most recent inspection. The recent inspection of front-line child protection services found senior managers are visible and accessible to front-line staff. This contributes to positive staff morale and gives senior managers detailed awareness of operational issues. Managers have made effective use of external scrutiny to improve the quality

of services. Workforce development is of high quality, including support for newly qualified social workers. However, information on children's race, religion, language or culture is not always accurately recorded and used consistently to design service improvement.

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 "J. Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley,
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment