

8 November 2011

Mr Eric Robinson
Deputy Chief Executive and Director for People
Staffordshire County Council
Wedgwood Building
Tipping Street
Stafford
Staffordshire ST16 2DH

Dear Mr Robinson

Annual children's services assessment

Ofsted guidance published in April 2011 explains that the annual assessment of children's services is derived from the performance profile of the quality of services 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 other published data.

In reaching the assessment of children's services, Ofsted has taken account of inspection outcomes including the arrangements for making sure children are safe and stay safe and performance against similar authorities and/or 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 2010, 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.

Staffordshire County Council children's services assessment 2011

Children's services assessment	Performs poorly (1)
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Children's services in Staffordshire County Council perform poorly. Last year, services were performing well. However, a recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children in need and children who may be in need of protection, found a systemic weakness in responding to and investigating child protection concerns. This resulted in a priority action for the local authority. The report identified significant delays in sharing concerns about children and additional delays in deciding what safeguarding action to take, which can result in some children experiencing further harm. In addition to this area for priority action, areas for development identified in the previous unannounced inspection had not yet been tackled. Consequently, the local authority no longer meets the assessment principles for performs well and is assessed to be performing poorly.

In relation to the other services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted, the large majority are good or better and provision helps children to learn and stay safe. As found elsewhere, changes to secondary provision are taking place and more schools have become academies. Previous inspection judgements for these schools have been taken into account in the assessment.

Strengths

- Two-thirds of the early years and childcare providers are good or better, although a small number are inadequate. This is a very similar picture to 2010. Since last year, four more of the local authority's children's centres have been inspected. Of these, one is outstanding, two are good and one is satisfactory.
- As in 2010, the large majority of provision for children under five in nurseries and primary schools is good or better, with some of it being outstanding. The attainment of five-year-olds at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage has been consistently above the averages nationally and for similar areas since 2006. The achievement gap between five-year-olds from low-income families and others of the same age has narrowed since 2006 but has remained the same for the last two years.
- The large majority of secondary schools in the local authority are good or better. This is an improvement on last year. Since last year, one school has closed and re-opened as an academy. Five others have converted to academy status. Of the schools that are now academies, three were outstanding, two were good and one was satisfactory. These grades have been taken into account in this assessment.

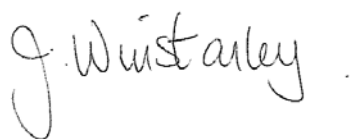
- The attainment of 11-year-olds is in line with the averages nationally and for similar areas. The proportion of 16-year-olds gaining A* to C grades in five GCSE subjects, including English and mathematics, is in line with the averages for similar areas and across the country. The same is true for the proportion of 19-year-olds achieving the equivalent of two A level passes. The rates of improvement are similar to those elsewhere.
- There has been further improvement in the quality of the special schools run by the local authority. Seven of them are now outstanding, compared with six last year and, as in 2010, none of the provision is inadequate.
- Since last year, the local authority's adoption service has received its first inspection. It was judged to be good overall and for all aspects that were examined, including arrangements for protecting children from harm and neglect and helping them stay safe. The local authority's fostering agency was inspected in 2008 and is outstanding.
- Two of the local authority's children's homes have closed since last year, one of which was good and the other outstanding. As in 2010, all the remaining provision is good or better. Of the children's homes commissioned from other agencies or local authorities, the very large majority are good or better but one provider is inadequate.

Areas for further improvement

- The local authority's child protection system meets statutory requirements in several areas. Nevertheless, there are serious weaknesses in important aspects of provision.
- Even allowing for the reorganisation of schools, two-thirds of the provision for learning after the age of 16 is still only satisfactory. This has changed very little since last year.
- Although the majority of primary schools are good or better, over a third of them are no better than satisfactory. This is very similar to the situation in 2010.
- The attainment gap between 16-year-olds from low-income families and others of the same age has widened over the last two years and is greater than the average nationally.

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".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment