

9 December 2010

Mr Paul Greenhalgh
Director of Children's Services
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council
Civic Centre, Victoria Avenue
Southend-on-Sea, Essex, SS2 6ER

Dear Mr Greenhalgh

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.

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs well (3)
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Children's services in Southend-on-sea Borough Council continue to perform well.

A large majority of all types of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. Much of the childcare in the borough and many of the primary schools are good or better. Two schools have been judged to be providing an inadequate standard of education, whereas in the previous year no primary schools were in this category. The quality of secondary schools has improved in the last year as two more schools were judged to be good in their most recent inspections. A relatively high number are outstanding. However, one school was placed in special measures because of inadequate leadership and management and the poor quality of teaching at the school. The further education college is good, but school sixth forms are very variable in quality. Fewer special schools are as good as they could be, as only two out of five are good. The large pupil referral unit in the borough is adequate. The local fostering and adoption agencies are both good. The two serious case reviews evaluated in the last year have been conducted well.

An unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found much that was strong and no issues that seem to be putting children whose circumstances make them vulnerable at risk of harm.

National performance measures show a very large majority of outcomes are in line or above the averages for England and for similar areas. Results in national tests are all above average, except those for 11-year-olds which are just below. The achievement of 16- and 19-year-olds is very high. Children and young people with special educational needs and those from lower-income families aged 11, 16 and 19 do not do as well as those from similar backgrounds across the country. The latest results show an improvement for 16-year-olds from lower-income families. However, for the other children and young people improvements have been only slow and there is too large a gap in their achievements and that of their peers.

Key areas for further development

- Improve special schools so that more are good or better.
- Improve the achievement of children and young people with special educational needs and those from lower-income families.

Outcomes for children and young people

Most local services and settings are good at encouraging children and young people to lead healthy lives. Improving breast-feeding is a priority area for improvement. Local knowledge about whether babies are still being breast-fed when they are six weeks old is very good. While many mothers start breast-feeding their babies when

they are born the number who continue is lower than the England average. Childhood obesity, which is above average in the borough, remains a challenge. Reductions in the number of five-year-olds who are obese are not being sustained and the number of obese 11-year-olds continues to rise. Nevertheless, large numbers of children and young people take part in sport regularly. Services for children and young people with emotional and mental health problems have improved. In a recent survey children and young people indicated their relationships with family and friends are much better than average. Preventative care for children in the care of the local authority has not been as good as in previous years. The local authority attributes this to a shortage of dentists locally and difficulties in obtaining health assessments from other local authorities.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are almost always good. An unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services in May 2010 found good partnership working and a well-established common assessment process being used to provide effective early support to families whose circumstances make them vulnerable. Morale is high among social workers and there is a strong commitment to continually improving front-line services. However, the quality of information provided by other agencies when children are first referred to social care services is variable and this can place additional pressures on social workers. The quality of the assessment of children's needs is also variable. The number of children in the care of the local authority, though reducing, remains much higher than the average in similar areas. More are being placed locally ensuring greater continuity of schooling, friendships and contact with their family. The stability of short-term placements has fallen and is much lower than in the rest of England; however, the stability of long-term placements is much higher than average. Arrangements for ensuring children and young people are safe in the community are strong. For example, partners continue to be more effective than in similar areas at reducing the number of children who are killed or serious injured on the roads. Relatively low numbers of children are admitted to hospital because they have been injured either accidentally or deliberately.

Childcare, nurseries, schools and other services and institutions are good at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning. However, the pupil referral unit is satisfactory in this area. The achievement of very young children continues to improve rapidly and is higher than in similar areas. Test results at age 11 are broadly average, but the rate of improvement has been slower than average. Examination results at age 16 continue to improve strongly, so are well above those in similar areas. While improvement in some of the non-selective schools in the borough has been very good, it is too slow in others. Behaviour is almost always good in secondary schools. However, the number of secondary pupils who are often absent from school, though improving, is much higher than the rest of England. Children in the care of the local authority achieve well in primary schools. The local authority knows it needs to improve the achievement of children and young people with special educational needs.

Most schools and other settings and services are good at involving children and young people in decision making and their community. The local authority reports it has increased the opportunities for consulting with and involving children and young people with special needs or disabilities in the last year. The youth offending service performs adequately on most measures, but has good capacity to sustain and improve their performance. There has been a very large reduction in young people offending for the first time. However, re-offending rates remain higher than in similar areas and more young offenders are receiving custodial sentences, due in part to their reluctance to undertake community service. The proportion of young offenders taking part in education or training is well above the national average. Relatively high numbers of young women under the age of 18 become pregnant. Local services are working together well in this area so the number continues to fall at a faster than average rate. Preventative action to reduce the spread of chlamydia is being successful. High numbers of young people are being screened and positive diagnoses are falling.

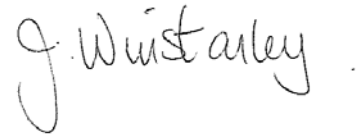
The quality of school sixth forms is variable. Provision in the four selective schools is outstanding, it is good in the two Roman Catholic schools, but none of the borough's five non-selective schools were judged to have a good sixth form in their most recent inspection. The local authority knows it needs to improve the quality of post-16 provision for young people with special educational needs. High numbers of young people, including those leaving the care of the local authority, continue with their learning when they are age 16 and fewer are discontinuing by the time they are age 17. The number of young people who take no part in any education or training has fallen and is much lower than in similar areas. Nineteen-year-olds in Southend obtain more qualifications than those in similar areas.

Prospects for improvement

Many outcomes for children and young people in Southend are improving. The local authority and partner's review of its Children and Young People's Plan demonstrates good progress has been made in reducing the number of young people who commit offences for the first time and those who take no part in education or training after the age of 16. Good partnership work is demonstrated through the continuing success in reducing teenage pregnancies and the impact of preventative action to reduce the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. The recent inspection of front-line child protection services found improved recruitment of permanent social workers has led to good stability and reduced pressures on front-line staff. Ofsted monitoring visits to the weakest schools show the local authority has provided good support and extra capacity to a primary school to bring about improvements. For the secondary school in special measures, the local authority has taken firm action to appoint strong leaders to the school. Although initially there was a lack of clarity about expected improvements and how progress was going to be monitored, subsequently the local authority has set out clearly what is expected.

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' and a period at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment