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Mr Peter Morgan
Strategic Director – Children, Schools and Families
Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council
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Dear Mr Morgan

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.

Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs well (3)
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Children's services in Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council perform well.

The very large majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. The local authority's track record of strong performance has been sustained specifically in the areas of early years and education and in some aspects has improved since 2009. This, however, masks weaker performance in front-line services within children's social care. Nearly all nursery and primary schools are good or better. Mostly good and outstanding provision is found in secondary schools, school sixth forms, further education colleges, special schools and the pupil referral units. Most early years and childcare settings are good or better, although there is more satisfactory provision in this sector than other universal services. There is very little inadequate provision; only a very small minority of childcare is inadequate, as is one secondary school with a sixth form attached. Children's homes managed by the local authority are mostly good, with the exception of one which is satisfactory. Of the 18 children's homes managed by private and voluntary agencies, 14 are good or better and the remainder are satisfactory. Local adoption arrangements are good but fostering arrangements are only satisfactory. The very large majority of services and settings are good or better at helping children and young people stay safe and achieve well in their education.

An unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services in 2010 found one strength, several areas that meet statutory guidance and six areas for development. The local authority's work to identify and monitor children in private fostering arrangements is good.

National performance measures show almost all outcomes are in line with or above the averages for England or for similar areas, with some marked improvement since 2009. The achievement of children in their early years is in line with similar areas and progress is being made. By the time they reach 11-years-old, results in national tests in 2009 were above average and more 16-year-olds do better than their peers in similar areas. Children aged 11 who have special educational needs do better than those in similar areas, although those from low-income backgrounds less so. The gap in attainment at the age of 16 for those from low-income families and those with special educational needs has more recently begun to close.

Key areas for further development

- Improve arrangements for safeguarding in front-line children social care services.
- Sustain progress in educational outcomes for children at five-years-old.

- Improve the achievement of 11- and 16-year-olds from low-income backgrounds.

Outcomes for children and young people

Local arrangements to encourage children and young people to live healthy lives are very successful. All childcare settings, schools, colleges and children's homes do this very well. Nearly all health measures have continued to show good results, although the number of mothers breast-feeding is still much lower than elsewhere in the country. Good improvements include a reduction in the number of five-year-old children who are very overweight and continuing development in services for children and young people with emotional or mental health difficulties. Sefton has one of the lowest rates nationally of young women under the age of 18 who become pregnant and numbers continue to fall. There are more young people who say they have been drunk or taken drugs recently than in similar areas. Reducing risk-taking behaviours in relation to drugs, alcohol and sexual health is a key priority for the local authority.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are good or better in nearly all school settings. Local authority fostering arrangements are only satisfactory in this respect. The recent unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found that local services and agencies work well together to ensure good quality early intervention support is provided in a timely way to those children, young people and families with a range of needs, however complex. Local children in need data show improvements in most outcome measures. However, while the inspection also identifies several areas that meet statutory guidance, a number of areas for development are also highlighted, two of which are of particular concern. These two highlighted the premature closure of some case contacts despite evidence showing potential risk factors to vulnerable children and young people, and poor preparation and planning which can lead to delays in investigations of child protection concerns, thus placing some children and young people at potential risk of harm. Initial and core assessments are of variable quality and some caseloads are excessively high. Hospital admissions caused by unintentional or deliberate injuries to children have continued to reduce year-on-year. A recent survey found that fewer children and young people are bullied than elsewhere. However, progress in reducing the number of serious accidents and deaths to children on the roads has been negligible.

Nearly all settings are very good at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning. In this respect, pupil referral units and special schools are good or outstanding, as are most nursery and primary schools. One secondary school recently judged to be inadequate by Ofsted has significant falling rolls, and the local authority is currently going through the statutory process for a proposal to close the school with effect from 31 August 2011. In most cases the local authority is very successful in its work to help schools raise standards; results in national tests at the age of 11 and 16 confirm this. Children aged 11-years-old who have special educational needs also do well when compared to their peers nationally. By the age of 16, more than half of young people gain five or more good GCSEs, although those

from low-income families do not do as well; this is identified by the local authority as needing improvement. Behaviour is outstanding in nearly all secondary schools and the number of secondary pupils who are often absent from school continues to fall year-on-year.

Arrangements for involving children and young people in decision-making and activities are good in nearly all settings. As a result of the successful 'Get Involved, Get Informed' strategy which enables young people to help with planning and reviewing local services, at least 20 youth clubs have been improved since 2009. A large number of young people say they are now involved regularly in local recreational activities. The Kids in Care Council has designed training materials for staff who work with them and a care leaver's forum meets monthly to offer support to each other. Rates of re-offending are falling and are lower than similar areas. An inspection of the local youth offending service in 2009 found key weaknesses in practice but the re-inspection in September 2010 has judged progress to be satisfactory and overall performance to be much stronger.

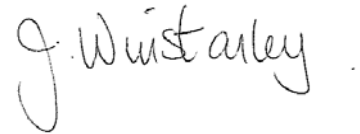
Young people receive good support to gain skills and qualifications needed for future work or training. The number of young people who are not in education, work or training has increased slightly since last year following three years of steady reductions. This remains a key challenge for Sefton and the local authority is working with business partners and local colleges to introduce new opportunities. High numbers of 17-year-olds continue in education or training and achieve good GCSE qualifications or equivalent by the time they reach the age of 19, including those who come from low-income families. However, fewer from this group go on to higher education than in similar areas. Nearly all young people who have offended have success in finding suitable jobs or training and accommodation; the picture is not as positive for care leavers, although many more are helped to find accommodation than work or training.

Prospects for improvement

Almost all outcomes for children and young people are good or better in Sefton, although aspects of front-line children's social care services are weaker. The unannounced inspection in October 2010 found very effective use of the common assessment framework with good quality early interventions but this positive work was overshadowed by weaker practice, for example in case management. The local authority promptly gave the inspection team assurances that swift action would be taken to address these areas specifically. The local authority's review of its Children and Young People's Plan shows good progress in other important areas, such as reducing health inequalities and sustaining good standards in education. The youth offending service has now established the foundations for sustained improvement. Outstanding support is given to schools to ensure the quality of teaching and learning is sustained but there is more work to do to improve standards for young children just starting school and for those 11- and 16-year-olds that come from low-income families.

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