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Ms Barbara Peacock
Corporate Director, People
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
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Dear Ms Peacock

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.

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council children's services assessment 2011

Children's services assessment	Performs poorly (1)
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Children's services in Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council perform poorly. In January 2010, a full inspection of safeguarding and services for looked after children found safeguarding services to be inadequate. The local authority's capacity to improve these services was also judged to be inadequate. As a result of this inspection, children's services were judged to be performing poorly in 2010. In March 2011, an unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children in need and children who may be in need of protection, found no areas requiring urgent remedial action, one strength and nine areas for development. Inspectors noted that four of the areas for development from the full inspection in 2010 had not been addressed fully and, although some progress had been made, a large number of important areas still required improvement. These findings are central to the overall assessment of children's services in 2011.

The majority of settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better and the large majority of provision supports children and young people in learning and staying safe. However, too much provision is only satisfactory and some is inadequate. Improving the quality of secondary schools, post-16 education provision, attendance and outcomes for 16-year-olds remain areas for improvement.

Strengths

- Provision for young children, including for those of pre-school age, is mostly good. The large majority of nursery provision is good or outstanding and effective support is provided to children and families in children's centres. Very young children make good progress in their levels of development. Outcomes in the Early Years Foundation Stage, including for young children from low-income families, match similar areas.
- Over half of the primary schools are good or better and this is a slight improvement on 2010. The schools in an Ofsted category of concern are making satisfactory progress. Ofsted monitoring visits to these schools show that the local authority provides effective support to bring about improvement. Results at the age of 11 match similar areas and provisional results for 2011 show improvement.
- Specialist education provision, including all the special schools, the special school sixth forms and the seven pupil referral units, remains mostly good or better as it was in 2010. One inadequate pupil referral unit made good progress and is now satisfactory.
- Education outcomes at the age of 19 are improving and match similar areas. Outcomes for young people from low-income backgrounds have also improved and the proportion attaining a level 2 or level 3 qualification matches performance for such groups elsewhere. The gap in attainment

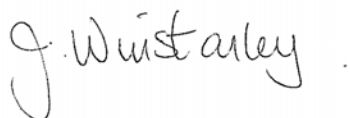
between these young people and the majority of the same age in Sandwell is narrowing.

Areas for further improvement

- The effectiveness of services to ensure that children and young people in Sandwell are safe remains inadequate until further safeguarding inspection evidence becomes available. The March 2011 unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children in need and children who may be in need of protection identified many weaknesses some of which remained from the previous full inspection in 2010.
- Services and outcomes for looked after children and young people are only satisfactory. The 2010 inspection found that direct work to ascertain the wishes and feelings of looked after children and carers was under developed; access to mental health services was limited and not all children who were privately fostered were monitored as required. The local authority fostering agency is inadequate and the adoption agency is only satisfactory. Only half of the children's homes are good.
- Although four of the five academies inspected are at least good, many young people do not have the opportunity to attend good secondary schools in Sandwell. Four of the nine local authority secondary schools and half of the school sixth forms are only satisfactory. One local authority secondary school is inadequate. As reported in the 2010 assessment, the proportion of young people achieving five good GCSE at grades A* to C including English and mathematics is below similar areas. Secondary school attendance is also below that of similar local authorities. Results for young people from low-income backgrounds and those with special educational needs are improving, but the attainment gap between these groups and all young people in Sandwell has not narrowed consistently over the past four years. The proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds in work, education or training is below similar areas.
- The March 2011 inspection of the youth offending service reported that substantial improvement was required in its work to reduce the risk of harm and moderate improvement to its safeguarding work and to prevent reoffending by young people.

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 trailing dot at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment