

3 December 2010

Ms Anna Wright  
Director of Education and Children's Services  
Reading Borough Council  
Level 10 Civic Centre  
Reading  
Berkshire RG1 7AE

Dear Ms Wright

## 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.

## Reading Borough Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs well (3)
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Children's services in Reading Borough Council perform well. This is an improvement from 2009 when services performed adequately.

The large majority of all settings and services inspected by Ofsted are good or better and key areas of provision have been strengthened. All special schools and children's homes are good or outstanding. Almost three quarters of early years and childcare provision, secondary schools and sixth form schools are at least good. The local authority's adoption service is good, but the fostering service is only satisfactory. Primary schools remain the weakest area of provision locally, with one in two schools judged no better than satisfactory and one school now inadequate. The pupil referral unit was also judged only satisfactory at its most recent inspection. Arrangements to help children and young people stay safe and achieve well are good or better in the very large majority of settings and services.

An unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services in October 2010 found two strengths, eight areas for development and no areas for priority action.

Most national performance measures show that outcomes for children and young people are broadly average or better. However, attainment for 11-year-olds has been below average for some years and Asian children, who make up almost one fifth of the age group, achieved some seven percentage points below the borough average in 2009. Unvalidated data for 2010 suggests the gap between Reading's overall performance and the average for similar areas is beginning to close. Results for 16-year-olds are broadly average and for 19-year-olds are better still, with improvement over the last three years at a faster rate than that seen elsewhere. The local authority has been successful in narrowing the gap in attainment between the majority of young people aged 16 and those from low-income families, as well as those with special educational needs. It has yet to replicate these achievements in the primary schools.

### Key areas for further development

- Improve primary schools so that more are good or better.
- Improve results for 11-year-olds and close the attainment gap for Asian children, children from low-income families and those with special educational needs.

### Outcomes for children and young people

The very large majority of services give good encouragement to children and young people in living healthy lives. Steps have been taken to improve support for children and young people with emotional and mental health difficulties with more services

provided in the community and better links between universal and specialist provision. The number of seriously overweight 11-year-olds has risen and is above the average for similar areas, despite comparatively high numbers of children and young people taking part in regular sport and exercise. The teenage pregnancy rate is also above average, but has reduced much faster than the national figures. While 2008 saw the lowest level overall for over 10 years, the under-16 rate has remained fairly constant. The number of young people screened for chlamydia, a sexually transmitted infection, is well below average and amongst the worst performance seen nationally.

Arrangements to help children and young people stay safe are good in the very large majority of services and settings. The recent unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found no priority actions, but the number of areas for development outweighed the strengths. Assessment processes have been streamlined and strong quality assurance systems are in place. Although a considerable amount of work has been done to embed the common assessment framework process, thresholds for referral to the access and assessment team are still set too low and are impeding its effectiveness. Other areas for development include the high rate of re-referral and the timelines of initial and core assessments. The number of children and young people who say they have been bullied is much higher than the average for similar areas. Services for children in care are satisfactory overall. Children's homes and the local authority's adoption service are good. Placement stability overall for children in care continues to be better than that seen nationally.

Provision to help children and young people to achieve well and to enjoy learning is good in the large majority of services and settings. The number of young people with poor school attendance is well below average and has fallen for four consecutive years. Special schools are a particular strength locally, but the quality of primary schools is not as good as that found nationally and too much is only satisfactory. Educational outcomes are improving at a faster rate than average for children at the end of the Reception Year; however this good performance is not maintained in primary school where results for 11-year-olds have been below average for a number of years. In addition Asian children, who make up almost one fifth of this group, achieved some seven percentage points below the borough average last year. Young people at the age of 16 do as well as the average elsewhere, and the number gaining good GCSE results in science and mathematics, in particular, is increasing at a faster than average rate. The local authority has been successful in closing the gap in attainment between the majority of young people at the age of 16 and those from low-income families, as well as those with special educational needs. However, this success has yet to be seen in closing the attainment gap between the different groups at the age of 11.

Children and young people get good support to have a say in decision-making in the very large majority of settings and services, but comparatively low numbers take part in organised activities outside of school. An active Youth Cabinet is in place and is working closely with the local authority and its partners on a campaign to increase leisure and recreation opportunities and to improve safety on the streets and public

transport. Re-offending by young people in Reading is comparable with figures for similar areas, but the number of young offenders in education, training or work, although improving, is not as good.

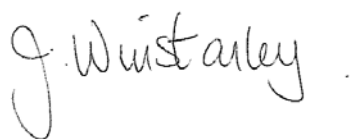
Children and young people get good support from the majority of services to help them do well in adult life. The contribution of special schools, the pupil referral unit and sixth form schools, for example, is consistently good, but the contribution of primary and secondary schools is variable. The number of young people who stay in learning after the age of 16 is broadly average, as is the number not in education, training or work which has fallen to its lowest point in five years. The local authority and its partners continue to focus attention on better supporting those groups, such as teenage parents, who face the most difficulties. The number of young people at the age of 19 who gain qualifications equivalent to five good GCSEs, or two A levels, is well above the average for similar areas and improving at a faster rate over the last three years. The picture for those from low-income families has improved significantly from a very low base.

### **Prospects for improvement**

Children's services performed adequately in 2009 and now perform well. The speed and effectiveness of the remedial action implemented by managers after a critical inspection of safeguarding has brought about greatly improved front-line child protection services. Good quality assurance arrangements, which include feedback from children and families, are helping to ensure that child protection services are effective and consistent across the borough. Social work staff are supported well by competent managers. However, the most recent unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services shows that there is still further work to do to. The Children and Young People's Plan sets out clear priorities and is rooted firmly in a good understanding of the local area, consultation with children and families, and focused action in response to inspection findings. The local authority's review of performance in 2009 is accurate and identifies where further improvement is required, such as attainment in primary schools and tackling inequalities in outcomes across the borough. The local authority has had some success in improving educational attainment for vulnerable groups. Its Narrowing the Gap strategy recognises there is more to do and gives this work a suitably high priority.

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