

9 December 2010

Mr Paul Burnett
Director for Children and Young People
Northamptonshire County Council
County Hall, George Row
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Dear Mr Burnett

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.

Northamptonshire County Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs adequately (2)
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Children's services in Northamptonshire County Council perform adequately.

The majority of types of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. For example, nursery schools and most schools for children with special educational needs are good, as is much of the childcare provision. Children's homes have improved during the last year and almost all are now good or better. Inspection by Ofsted shows that provision has improved in school sixth forms, pupil referral units and further education colleges. However, less than a half of secondary schools are good or better and only just over a half of primary schools are doing well. During the year seven schools improved and are no longer failing to provide an adequate standard of education. However, nine other schools were judged to be inadequate between September 2009 and July 2010. The local adoption agency is good and local authority and private fostering arrangements are adequate. Private fostering and adoption agencies are usually good.

An unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found much that was satisfactory and no areas for priority action. Child protection work is given a high priority. Children are appropriately involved in their assessments and their wishes and feelings are identified and recorded.

National performance measures show almost all outcomes are in line with averages for England or for similar areas. Achievement at the end of the foundation stage is above average, although not all children make the expected progress as they move through primary school. Results in national tests for 11-year-olds are lower than average with little improvement over time. More 16-year-olds each year are achieving the expected levels and results are improving at a faster rate than elsewhere. However, the gap in achievement between young people with special educational needs and their peers widens over time. Increasingly, 19-year-olds gain more qualifications but those from low-income families are not keeping pace with their peers and the gap is getting wider. Although numbers are improving, fewer care leavers are in education, employment or training than found elsewhere.

Key areas for further development

- Improve the quality of provision made by secondary schools so that more are good or better.
- Improve the level of challenge to primary schools to accelerate the rate of progress between seven and 11 years of age.
- Increase the number of 19-year-olds from low-income families who attain higher level qualifications.

Outcomes for children and young people

Local arrangements to encourage children and young people to live healthy lives are almost always successful. Nearly all schools and local authority children's homes are good at this, although childminders, private sector children's homes and the pupil referral unit do not do as well. Improvements include fewer children who are too overweight at the age of five and 11 and more children taking part in regular physical education and sport than elsewhere. Those in care receive regular health checks. The number of young women under the age of 18 who become pregnant is falling at a faster rate than found nationally, although this continues to be a target for improvement in some localities. Most recent data illustrate that fewer children and young people than elsewhere think they have good relationships with friends and families. The local authority is aware that there is further work to do to provide comprehensive services for emotional and mental health. Fewer 16-year-olds report that they have recently been drunk or taken drugs than in similar areas.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are almost always good. Inspection by Ofsted of schools and colleges confirms this. Arrangements in children's homes are always good, although this is not the case in the local authority adoption agency and private fostering agency where arrangements are only adequate. A recent unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services highlighted that there is a timely response to those children identified as in need of protection. However, recent data show that too few child protection reviews are completed within the recommended timescales. Improving local integrated services is part of the strategy to improve provision and ensure children and families get the support they need early enough. There are some weaknesses in the arrangements for ensuring that children are safe within the community. For example, the number of children killed or seriously injured on the roads is increasing and the number of children admitted to hospital as a result of deliberate or unintentional injury is similar to elsewhere. This is also the case for the number of children and young people who feel bullied. Not all children in care have their reviews on time.

Most child carers, nursery and secondary schools and colleges are good at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning. All pupil referral units are good at this. The local authority is increasingly successful in its work to help all schools get better with more children doing well in national tests at the age of 11 and 16. However, too few primary schools are helping children to make the expected rate of progress, especially in mathematics. At the age of 11 the gap with the national average is getting wider. In secondary schools examination results are improving although still lower than both similar areas and the England average. By the age of 16, just under a half of young people gain five or more good GCSEs. Those from low-income families and children and young people with special educational needs do not do as well as similar groups nationally. The number of secondary school age pupils who are often absent from school is lower than the national average, but behaviour in many schools is not as good as that found in similar areas.

Appropriate arrangements for involving children and young people in planning and reviewing local services have been developing over time. Almost all schools and other settings are good at involving young people in decision-making and activity in their communities. However, the number of young people saying they get involved in positive activities in their local community declined during the last year and is below that found in similar areas. Rates of offending for the first time are lower than in similar areas. The number of young people re-offending each year is reducing, but still higher than elsewhere.

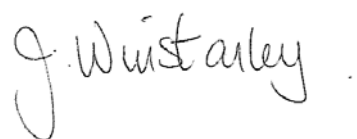
All 12 special schools, but only just over a half of secondary schools and colleges, provide good support in helping young people gain the skills and qualifications needed for future jobs. The local authority knows that not all young people do as well as they can at the age of 19. This is a main priority and each year more young people are gaining good qualifications. However, those from low-income families do not do so well and the gap in achievement with their peers is getting wider. Raising attainment for this group is identified by the local authority and partners as a key priority for further improvement. There are more young people than elsewhere, including young offenders, in education, employment or training, although this is not the case for care leavers. Over time, more care leavers are being found suitable accommodation.

Prospects for improvement

Most provision for children and young people is improving in Northamptonshire but sustained improvement across all outcomes is not yet secured. The review of the Children and Young People's Plan demonstrates secure progress in some important areas and targets for improvement are achieved; it is also clear about what still needs to be done. Local services have been restructured to be more responsive to local need. Priorities are based on a thorough analysis of current provision and comparison with similar areas and the national picture. Tackling the right priorities and good partnership working is demonstrated through clear improvements in educational provision and improving standards at 16 and 19 years of age. Ofsted's monitoring visits to weaker schools show that the local authority is doing good work to help them get better, although it is disappointing that more schools have been identified with weaknesses during the last year. The capacity for further improvement has been recognised by the withdrawal of government intervention. However, the inspection of front-line child protection services found capacity issues are placing workload pressures on some staff.

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