

9 December 2010

Mr John Harris
Director of Children, Schools and Families
Hertfordshire County Council
County Hall, Pegs Lane
Hertford
Hertfordshire SG13 8DF

Dear Mr Harris

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.

Hertfordshire County Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs well (3)
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Children's services in Hertfordshire County Council perform well.

The large majority of all types of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. All of the pupil referral units in the county are good as are most of the special schools. A higher than average number of primary schools are good. Three schools were judged to be in need of significant improvement in the last year whereas none were in this category in the previous year. Secondary schools, childminders and childcare providers are mainly good, with approximately a third being satisfactory and relatively few being inadequate. The number of good colleges has increased. The local fostering and adoption agencies are good. Last year all the local authority children's homes were good and one was outstanding. This year, three are outstanding, but one is now satisfactory.

The unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services carried out in October 2009 identified two areas for priority action, a number of strengths and several areas for development. A more recent inspection reported that safeguarding services are adequate. Services for looked after children and young people are also adequate with some good aspects. Four serious case reviews have been evaluated in the last year. One was conducted well and the other three adequately.

National performance measures show that almost all outcomes are in line with or above the averages for England or for similar areas. Results in national tests and examinations are higher than those in similar areas and well above the national average for children and young people of all ages. However, they are too low and not improving quickly enough in some parts of Hertfordshire, such as Broxbourne and Stevenage. Children and young people from lower income families achieve well throughout their educational career. The difference in the achievement of 16-year-olds identified as having special educational needs and that of their peers has not got smaller in recent years.

Key areas for further development

- Continue to improve the quality of safeguarding and services for looked after children and young people.
- Increase the rate of improvement of 16-year-olds with special educational needs.
- Narrow the achievement gap for children and young people in Stevenage and Broxbourne and their peers in the rest of Hertfordshire.

Outcomes for children and young people

A large majority of local services and settings are good at encouraging children and young people to live healthy lives. Nearly all schools and children's homes are good at this. The proportion of good childminders and childcare providers is lower than in similar areas and the local fostering agency is satisfactory. Parents of disabled children report lower levels of satisfaction with local services than those in the rest of England. Progress is being made in increasing the range and number of short break opportunities for disabled children. Strategies to reduce obesity among five- and 11-year-olds are being successful as the percentage of obese children has reduced in the last year. The highest levels of obesity are in the more deprived parts of the county such as Stevenage, Watford and Broxbourne. Higher than average numbers of children and young people regularly take part in sport activities. A recent inspection found support for children and young people accessing mental health and substance misuse services is adequate. Care planning for children and young people on the autistic spectrum, including those with Asperger's Syndrome and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is inconsistent across the county. Services to promote good health outcomes for looked after children and care leavers are adequate. However, the capacity of health services to meet the needs of looked after children and young people is insufficient countywide to meet demand.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe in schools and children's homes are almost always good. The Local Safeguarding Children Board's self-assessment of the information it has about children who have run away from home or care and the policies and procedures in place to deal with them is not as good as in other local authorities. A recent inspection of safeguarding provision found it to be adequate and improving. The safeguarding practice of staff in both statutory and voluntary agencies has improved significantly and they are more responsive to concerns about children's well-being and safety. Partner agencies have a better understanding of the criteria for services and this has resulted in more appropriate referrals being made to the local authority's social care services. The quality of the assessment of vulnerable children's needs and the plans to meet those needs are variable, although most are completed to at least an adequate standard. The timeliness of the completion of assessments has improved so performance is now in line with that in similar local authorities. Aspects of community safety, such as the numbers of children killed or seriously injured on the road and those who report they have experienced bullying are broadly average. Far fewer children are admitted to hospital because of accidental or deliberate injury than in similar areas and the rest of England.

Nurseries, schools and other services and settings are mostly good at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning. Standards for five-, 11- and 16-year-olds remain higher than in similar areas. However, this good performance masks consistently lower achievement in three areas of the county: Broxbourne, Stevenage, Welwyn and Hatfield. In Stevenage the achievement of 16-year-olds remains well below the county average and the gap is not narrowing. Behaviour is good in a high number of the county's secondary schools. Fewer than average secondary aged pupils are regularly absent from school and the number

continues to fall. The local authority knows boys achieve less well than girls in GCSE examinations and children from some minority ethnic groups and those in care do not achieve as well as those from similar backgrounds in other local authorities. Narrowing the gap in achievement is a key priority for improvement. Children and young people from lower income families and 11-year-olds with special educational needs do well at school. However the rate of improvement of 16-year-olds with special educational needs has been slower than their peers so the gap in achievement has got wider. Low numbers of statements of special educational need were produced within the required timescales in 2008/2009. The local authority reports it has successfully taken steps to address this and performance now is better than the national figure. The impact of services on enabling looked after children and young people to enjoy and achieve is good. This is due to the shared commitment, of all partners, to raising the standards, achievement and school attendance of looked after children and young people.

Most schools and other settings and services are good at involving children and young people in decision-making and their community. The infrastructure which enables young people to make their views heard by councillors and other decision-makers in the county has been improved. Young people have made presentations on a number of issues which have resulted in improvements to services, for example, the quality and accessibility of sexual health services. The engagement of looked after children and young people in service planning, training events, consultation events and service delivery is good. Fewer young women under the age of 18 become pregnant in Hertfordshire than in similar areas and the number is reducing more rapidly. However, the local authority knows rates remain relatively high in areas such as Broxbourne and Stevenage. Re-offending by young people in Hertfordshire is improving and is better than in similar areas with not as many offending for the first time. A high proportion of young offenders take part in education or training.

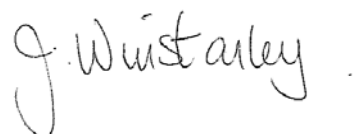
Colleges, schools and other providers are working together to provide all 14- to 19-year-olds with suitable education and training opportunities. High numbers of young people continue with their learning when they are aged 16 and by the age of 17 the proportion remains much higher than elsewhere. Few young people take no part in education and training and the number continues to fall despite the economic climate. More 19-year-olds overall are successful in obtaining qualifications than in similar areas and nationally. However in Stevenage achievement is exceptionally low compared to the rest of the county and England as a whole. Young people from lower income families achieve relatively well, but the difference in the proportion obtaining two or more A levels or their equivalent compared to their peers has not been getting smaller in recent years. There has been a significant increase since 2008 in the proportion of looked after children and young people in education, employment and training. Performance is now similar to that of other local authorities. Effective academic support is provided to the 44 care leavers who are in higher education.

Prospects for improvement

Many outcomes for children and young people are improving. The local authority and its partners' review of the Children and Young People's Plan demonstrates good progress in important areas. However, more needs to be done to accelerate improvements in these areas in the more deprived parts of the county, such as Broxbourne and Stevenage. Ofsted monitoring visits to weaker schools show that the local authority is doing good work to help them get better. A recent inspection reported that safeguarding and services for looked after children have adequate capacity to improve. The leadership and management of safeguarding services are good and they are satisfactory for services for looked after children. The Hertfordshire Safeguarding Children Board is re-establishing itself after a significant period when it was without a permanent chair or board manager. Since the appointment of an independent chair in mid-2009 it has made rapid progress in providing adequate leadership on safeguarding matters. The establishment of a social work academy for newly-qualified social workers has proved to be an outstanding success in attracting good quality social workers to Hertfordshire and improving retention rates. Corporate parenting arrangements for children in the care of the local authority are limited to an individual agency approach and not undertaken as a shared responsibility across all agencies. Elected members who sit on the corporate parenting board do not provide an effective level of challenge to some aspects of performance in looked after children's services.

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