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Mr Julian Wooster
Strategic Director - Children, Families and Learning
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Dear Mr Wooster

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 in, 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.

Portsmouth City Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs adequately (2)
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Children's services in Portsmouth City Council perform adequately. In 2009, a transitional year, the local authority was assessed as performing well. However, in 2010, there is not enough good provision in universal services to meet the minimum requirements for the higher grade.

Specialist services continue to be a strength. Fostering and adoption services are good, as are the large majority of special schools and children's homes. The quality of childminding and childcare has improved in the last year and is now good overall. The large majority of education provision for the youngest children is also good or better. By contrast, however, almost half the primary schools and more than half the secondary schools are only satisfactory. This is not as good as provision seen nationally. Post-16 education provision is also uneven with one good college and one satisfactory college.

The recent unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services identified a broad balance of strengths and areas for improvement. The local authority's work to identify and monitor private fostering arrangements is good.

National performance measures show that the large majority of outcomes for children and young people are broadly average or better. Educational attainment by five- and 11-year-olds is in line with the average for similar areas. However, GCSE results for 16-year-olds are consistently below average and the good improvement seen in recent years was not maintained in 2009. At the age of 19, the number of young people gaining qualifications equivalent to five or more good GCSEs, or two A levels, is broadly average. The local authority has had little success overall in narrowing the attainment gap between the majority of children and young people and those from low-income families, as well as those with special educational needs at the age of 11 and 16. The number of 16- to 18-year-olds in education, training or work is well below average and shows little sign of improvement.

Key areas for further development

- Improve primary schools and secondary schools so that more are good or better.
- Close the gap in attainment at all ages between the majority of children and young people and those whose circumstances make them more vulnerable.
- Improve GCSE results for 16-year-olds.
- Increase the number of young people in education, training or work.

Outcomes for children and young people

The very large majority of services are good at encouraging children and young people to live healthy lives. However, compared to similar areas, many more children in Portsmouth are seriously overweight and the local authority and its partners are right to identify tackling obesity as a top priority. The number of children taking part in regular sport and exercise has increased from a low base and is now similar to elsewhere. The number of young women under the age of 18 who become pregnant remains high compared to the average for similar areas, and the region as a whole, but has reduced at a faster rate. Action has been taken to improve services for children and young people with emotional and mental health difficulties.

Arrangements for helping children and young people stay safe are good in the very large majority of settings and services. The inspection of front-line child protection services found effective partnership work between the different agencies involved, was well established and resulted, in most cases, in prompt and appropriate referrals to the social care service. Maintaining this effective referral system is a key priority in local plans. Areas for improvement include the timeliness of assessments and ensuring that the needs of children are investigated fully before cases are closed. The local authority's work to identify and monitor private fostering arrangements is good. However, arrangements to respond to and support children who run away from home or over-night care are not as well established as they are elsewhere. Services for children in care are good overall. Fostering and adoption services are good, as are two-thirds of the children's homes.

The quality of education provision across the city is too variable. Early years and childcare provision is good and improving and special schools remain a strength locally. In contrast, however, too many primary and secondary schools are no better than satisfactory and provision overall is not as good as that found nationally. Although results for five- and 11-year-olds are about average, by the age of 16 young people fall behind their peers in similar areas. The number gaining five or more good GCSEs has improved from a very low base, but this good improvement was not maintained in 2009. The performance of schools across the city is very uneven with one in three schools showing a drop in GCSE results last year. Provisional results for 2010 suggest notable improvement, particularly for those schools receiving National Challenge support. However, schools overall are still not performing as well as those in similar areas. The local authority has had little success to date in narrowing the gap in attainment between the majority of children and young people and those from low-income families, as well as those with special educational needs. Although there has been a gradual reduction in the number of young people with poor school attendance, the rate is above average for similar areas and is particularly high in a few schools. The number of young people who are permanently excluded from school has fallen consistently over four years to well below average, but the picture for fixed-term exclusions is not nearly as good.

Successful arrangements are in place in the very large majority of services and settings to ensure children and young people have a say in decision-making. This includes the good work done in schools and in the community. A low number of children and young people are involved in organised leisure activities outside of school compared to the average in similar areas. Reducing youth crime remains a key priority for local partners. By most measures, the youth offending service works reasonably well and is supported by a good range of preventative services. Re-offending by young people is above average, but reducing rapidly. Young offenders are more likely to be out of work, education or training than is the case elsewhere. The number of young people who say they have taken drugs or been drunk recently is above the average for similar areas.

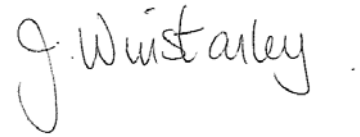
The effectiveness of support to help children and young people gain the skills and qualifications they need for later life is mixed. For example, inspectors judged most special schools as good or better in this respect, but less than half of the primary and secondary schools. The general further education college is good, but the sixth form college is now only satisfactory. The number of young people gaining good qualifications at the age of 19 is in line with the average for similar areas. The local authority and its partners have a priority to improve young people's employability and satisfactory progress has been made introducing new diploma courses. A recent Ofsted survey found that the further education college had successfully adapted the curriculum for young women who need high levels of support. The number of young people staying on in education or training after the compulsory school leaving age is above average and increasing each year, but the number of 16- to 18-year-olds who are not in work or learning remains stubbornly high with little sign of improvement.

Prospects for improvement

Children's services performed well in 2009, but are now only adequate. Good access to training, personal development and supervision is having a positive impact on the recruitment and retention of social workers and in strengthening local safeguarding arrangements. However, the local authority and its partners continue to face major challenges in improving outcomes for children and young people and the track record of achievement to date is mixed. Too many schools are only satisfactory and the encouraging improvements seen in GCSE results are not yet consistent across the city. The local authority and its partners are nevertheless ambitious for change and have set out clearly their agreed priorities in the revised Children and Young People's Plan. A new leadership team for children's services and chair for Local Safeguarding Children's Board are in place. Partners are realistic about what needs to be done to tackle long-standing inequalities in health and education across the city and a major focus for the year ahead is the development of new commissioning arrangements.

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 period at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment