

9 December 2010

Ms Yvette Stanley
Director of Children, Schools and Families
London Borough of Merton
Merton Civic Centre
London Road
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Dear Ms Stanley

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.

London Borough of Merton children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs adequately (2)
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Children's services in the London Borough of Merton perform adequately. In 2009, a transitional year, Merton was assessed as performing well. However, in 2010 the overall effectiveness of secondary schools no longer justifies that grade.

The majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better and the large majority are at least good in helping children and young people learn and in keeping them safe. The overall effectiveness of childminder and childcare settings has improved since the last assessment, but remains satisfactory overall. Nurseries and early years provision in primary schools are mostly good and two thirds of primary schools are good or better, as in similar areas. The overall effectiveness of secondary schools is lower than at the time of the last assessment and is much lower than for similar areas, although no local authority maintained school is now inadequate. Only two of the six local authority schools are good or better and although one academy is good, the other is inadequate. Secondary school sixth forms are good or better, with the exception of one academy sixth form which is inadequate. There is no inadequate provision for groups whose circumstances have made them vulnerable. Special schools are mostly good or better and the pupil referral unit has improved to good. Three quarters of the children's homes are at least good and the local authority children's home is outstanding. Fostering and adoption agencies in the borough are mostly satisfactory and the majority are run by the private and voluntary sector.

The recent unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services identified strengths and a number of areas for improvement but none requiring priority action.

The very large majority of national performance measures show outcomes for children and young people to be in line with or above comparators. Standards achieved by 16-year-olds and numbers gaining higher level qualifications by the age of 19 are, however, well below averages for similar areas. Achievements of those from low-income families are in line with similar areas; although achievements reduced last year for 11- and 16-year-olds, they continued to improve at age 19. Attainment gaps for those from families with low incomes have narrowed recently for 19-year-olds but have widened at ages 11 and 16. Attainment gaps are also not narrowing for children and young people with special educational needs. Behaviour in secondary schools has improved overall and numbers of young people who are often absent are reducing.

Key areas for further improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Improve the overall effectiveness of secondary schools so that more are good or better and improve standards achieved by 16-year-olds.

- Continue to improve the number of young people achieving higher level qualifications by the age of 19.
- Close attainment gaps for 11- and 16-year-olds from families with low incomes and children and young people with special educational needs.

Outcomes for children and young people

Most settings and services help children and young people to adopt healthy lifestyles well. More children are taking part in physical activities and sport and fewer than in similar parts of the country are too overweight. Steady progress has been made in reducing the numbers of young women under the age of 18 who become pregnant. Young people report less alcohol and drug misuse and this is now a little lower than in similar areas. Services for children and young people with emotional and mental health difficulties have improved and waiting times have reduced.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are mostly good, and satisfactory overall for childminders. Despite a significant turnover of social workers the authority responds promptly to concerns about the safety of children and works well with other agencies to provide the services needed by children and their families. Fewer full assessments of children's needs are now completed on time but fewer children and young people require more than one child protection plan. Actions to keep children safe in their communities are effective; children in Merton report that they feel safer than average. Very good progress has been made in reducing the numbers of children killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents. Far fewer children than average are admitted to hospital due to injuries that are accidental or deliberate. The extent of bullying is broadly average but children and young people report that schools are good at dealing with this.

Children do well in their early years and the lowest achieving children are beginning to catch up with others. Results in national tests for 11-year-olds are comparable to similar parts of the country and improving. Ofsted inspections have confirmed most schools and settings as good at helping children learn, but secondary schools are much weaker. The standards achieved in national tests at the age of 16, although improving, are much lower than in similar areas and just below the national average. Despite having made good progress in reducing the numbers of primary and secondary schools not reaching the minimum standards for pupil performance in previous years, they increased last year. Eleven- and 16-year-olds from families with low incomes mostly achieve results similar to the same groups nationally but they are not catching up with their peers in the borough. There are still differences in the standards achieved by some minority ethnic groups but test results for 16-year-olds show good progress in recent years for Black Caribbean and Mixed Race Groups. Behaviour in secondary schools has improved overall but more children are often absent, although numbers are reducing steadily. Children and young people with special educational needs achieve results which are comparable to those in similar areas at the age of 11, but lower at 16. Attainment gaps are not narrowing at either age.

Ofsted inspections have found children and young people are helped to contribute to decision-making processes and to take part in community activities well. Permanent exclusions from schools are lower than elsewhere. Children's involvement in organised after-school activities has declined, however, and is much lower than in similar parts of the country. Although young people in the borough are concerned about crime, numbers of those committing crimes for the first time have reduced significantly. Latest data, however, show more re-offending. Good numbers of young people who have offended continue with their education, undertake training or find work. Most have suitable places to live, although numbers of those who do are reducing.

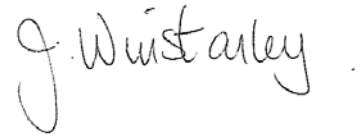
Most settings and services are helping children and young people to gain the knowledge and skills they need for working life well. In comparison to similar areas, fewer 17-year-olds continue with their education or training, but numbers who are not working, being educated or trained are broadly average. Outcomes are improving, however, by both these measures. Increasing numbers are gaining qualifications by the age of 19, but far fewer than in similar areas at the higher level. Standards achieved by young people from families with low income are improving at the age of 19 and they are catching up with others in the borough. Almost all care leavers are helped to find suitable accommodation and most work, continue with their education or undergo training.

Prospects for improvement

Outcomes for children and young people are improving in most areas. Analyses of needs are comprehensive and particular attention is given to obtaining the views of children and young people about things which concern them. There is a clear emphasis on identifying the needs of children and families early to ensure that resources are used effectively to provide support and ensure good value for money. Increasingly, support is being targeted to the needs of individual children and young people, although actions are not yet having enough impact on narrowing attainment gaps. The authority works well with partners in identifying priorities which are clearly set out in the Children and Young People's Plan. This is particularly evident in improvements achieved in emotional and mental health support for children and young people and in ensuring they are safe in their communities. Improving the overall effectiveness of secondary schools continues to be a key priority. Work is also underway to increase opportunities for 16- to 18-year-olds to learn and to raise standards at the age of 19. As confirmed by the inspection of front-line child protection services, difficulties appointing and keeping social workers are being overcome. The Youth Justice Board has judged that Merton youth offending services are performing adequately and have good capacity to improve.

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