

9 December 2010

Ms Rosalind Turner
Managing Director - Children Families and Education Directorate
Kent County Council
Room 2.39, Sessions House
County Hall
Maidstone ME14 1XQ

Dear Ms Turner

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.

Kent County Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs poorly (1)
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Children's services in Kent County Council perform poorly. This is because the most recent inspection of safeguarding arrangements has reported that services are inadequate, with too many children left without sufficient safeguards or adequate protection arrangements. Services for looked after children are also inadequate.

The overall effectiveness of childminder and childcare settings has improved since the last assessment and, as for nurseries and early years provision in primary schools, the large majority is good or better. The majority of primary schools are good or better although this is fewer than in similar areas and more are now inadequate. Contrastingly, secondary schools are more effective with significantly more good or better than elsewhere. Almost all special schools and residential special schools are at least good. Pupil referral units have improved since the last assessment with the majority now good and none inadequate. For learners after the age of 16 the large majority of provision is good. More sixth forms than average are good or better and all special school sixth forms are at least good. General further education colleges and independent specialist colleges located in the county are mostly satisfactory with one general further education college outstanding. Children's homes are mostly good and the local authority no longer places children in the two inadequate homes managed by the private and voluntary sector. Fostering and adoption agencies are almost all good or better as are arrangements for private fostering.

National measures of performance show a very large majority of outcomes to be in line with comparators. The standards children achieve in national tests at the age of 11 however are much lower than those in similar parts of the country. Pupils make better progress in secondary schools and 16-year-olds achieve better results in national tests than in similar areas. Children from families with low incomes do not do as well as those in similar parts of the country at the age of 11. For 16- and 19-year-olds however standards are improving and are average for similar local authorities. Attainment gaps are not closing to any significant extent for primary and secondary pupils although there is some progress at the age of 19 and the gap at the end of children's Reception Year at school is less than seen nationally and in similar areas. Standards achieved by 16-year-olds who are looked after by the local authority are below national averages. The rate of permanent exclusions from schools has reduced recently although it remains above the national average.

Key areas for further improvement

- As a matter of urgency, improve the effectiveness of child protection services.
- Improve provision and outcomes for children and young people looked after by the local authority.

- Improve the overall effectiveness of primary schools and standards achieved by 11-year-olds, including those from low-income families.
- Reduce the number of children and young people who are permanently excluded from school.

Outcomes for children and young people

Provision to support children and young people in leading healthy lives is good in most inspected services and settings although there is room for improvement across pupil referral units. Access to support services within local communities is improving for children and young people with emotional or mental health difficulties and the local authority is strengthening these services for disabled young people. Services to promote the health of children in care are inadequate; fewer than average have health assessments and waiting times for those with emotional or mental health needs are excessive. Overall, many more children and young people now take part in sport or physical activities regularly although the number of children who are too overweight did not reduce further in 2008/09. Fewer girls under the age of 18 are getting pregnant although the numbers are very variable across the county. Misuse of drugs and alcohol is no different to other parts of the country and youth support services are increasingly targeted to areas of greatest need.

Inspections of individual institutions, settings and services have found arrangements for keeping children safe to be implemented well. However, the recent inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services found that all agencies do not exercise their safeguarding responsibilities appropriately by ensuring that their referrals contain accurate and sufficient information to enable informed responses to be made. There are significant differences in the quality of front-line child protection services across the county and too many children are left without sufficient safeguards or adequate protection arrangements. Partner agencies are failing to consistently raise concerns in these circumstances. Within the community, good progress has been made in reducing the number of children killed or seriously injured in road accidents. Hospital admissions due to accidents are relatively constant and in line with similar areas. In a recent survey children reported that they feel safe in their communities, and work to address bullying is effective.

Inspected services are mostly good or better in helping children learn but primary schools are not as effective. Young children do well during their Reception Year at school and standards are improving faster than elsewhere. Children do not make enough progress in primary schools however, particularly in English, and the standards achieved by 11-year-olds are well below those of similar areas. Improvement over the last three years has been modest and very variable across the county. One in seven primary schools is not achieving the minimum standards for pupil performance. Pupils make good progress in secondary schools, and pass rates in national tests at the age of 16 are good and improving. The number of secondary schools not achieving the minimum standards for pupil achievements is reducing rapidly.

Children from families with low income do not do as well as those in similar parts of the country in primary school but catch up by the age of 16. Children and young people with special educational needs do comparatively well at the age of 16. The recent safeguarding and looked after children inspection found achievement, attendance and progress made by looked after children inadequate. Inspectors conclude that it is too early to assess the impact of recent actions by the local authority to bring about improvement. Behaviour in secondary schools is improving and attendance is higher than average and improving faster.

Children and young people are encouraged well to involve themselves in activities in their community and participate in decision-making, although this aspect is not as good in pupil referral units. Targeted activities are increasingly successful in securing the views and participation of vulnerable groups and those who are reluctant to voice opinions. Some two-thirds of young people take part in organised activities in their area and the numbers are increasing. Much work has been done to encourage involvement by vulnerable groups such as those who may offend or are likely to behave recklessly. Numbers of young people who break the law for the first time have reduced significantly over the past three years and re-offending rates are reducing well. Young offenders are increasingly found suitable accommodation, although numbers remain on the low side, and most work or continue with their education or training.

Most services are good or better in helping children develop the skills and attitude required for working life. The local authority has been very successful in reducing the number of young people who are not working or not in education or training. More young people are gaining qualifications by the age of 19 including those from families with low incomes, and the gap between them and their peers is beginning to close. The local authority has also been successful in raising the ambition and aspiration of children in care at this age, outcomes are good and young people are very positive about the quality of services provided after the age of 16.

Prospects for improvement

Outcomes for children and young people are improving in many areas although, as recognised by the local authority, challenges remain in narrowing gaps in outcomes between different localities and different groups of children and young people. The local authority and partner agencies have not however sufficiently addressed weaknesses in safeguarding arrangements identified through their own audits or the unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements which took place in August 2010. Quality assurance and performance management arrangements are ineffective, both in ensuring children and young people are appropriately safeguarded and in improving outcomes for children in care. The Children and Young People's Plan provides a clear overview of progress in many areas and identifies strengths and priorities for improvement. Although the annual review of the plan recognises difficulties experienced by the local authority in appointing and retaining social workers, the review failed to identify the serious failings identified by the August 2010 unannounced inspection and the recent full inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services. Progress in improving

the overall effectiveness of primary schools and standards achieved by 11-year-olds has been slow and continues to be a key priority. Monitoring visits to weaker schools by Ofsted inspectors have however consistently found the support provided by the local authority and school improvement partners to be both good and challenging. Recognising differing needs and priorities across the county, the local authority has reorganised its operations based on district teams which are better placed to manage resources according to local priorities and support collaborative working including collaboration between schools to raise standards. The youth offending service performs well with good capacity to improve.

This children's services assessment is provided in accordance with section 138 of the Education and Inspection Act 2006.

Yours sincerely

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment