

9 December 2009

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

Dear Mr Harris

Children's services annual rating

Ofsted guidance published in May 2009 explained that the annual rating would derive from a new performance profile of the quality of services and outcomes for children and young people in each local area. This profile includes findings from across Ofsted's inspection and regulation of services and settings for which the council has strategic or operational responsibilities, either alone or in partnership with others, together with data from the relevant *Every Child Matters* indicators in the new National Indicator Set (NIS).

In considering the evidence in the profile to determine the children's services rating for 2009 it has become clear that the continuing gaps in the data are significant, particularly those relating to aspects of social care and services for Looked After Children. Ofsted has decided therefore to use 2009 as a transitional year easing into the full application of the new system in 2010. As a consequence, although the performance profile remains central to Ofsted's rating, we have interpreted the performance bands with flexibility and exercised professional judgement with caution.

The annual rating 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, a rating of 'performs excellently' does not mean all aspects of provision are perfect. Similarly, a rating of 'performs poorly' does not mean there are no adequate or even good aspects.

Children's services rating 2009

Children's services rating	Performs adequately (2)
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Children's services in Hertfordshire County Council perform adequately.

While the overall effectiveness of a large majority of the local authority's inspected and regulated services and provision are good, arrangements for ensuring children and young people are kept safe were judged to be inadequate in the joint area review in 2007. Since then further inspection has found improvements have occurred, but more are still needed.

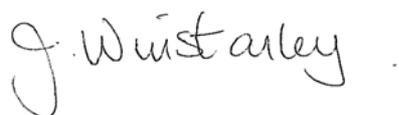
A higher than average proportion of primary and secondary schools and school sixth forms are good or outstanding than is found in similar areas or nationally. The proportion of good childcare and nursery provision in the county is broadly average, but a lower proportion of childminders are good than found in similar areas or nationally. The proportion of good post-16 provision in further education colleges is below average.

Specialist provision and services for children and young people whose circumstances make them more vulnerable are variable in quality. A recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children in need found a number of improvements had occurred since the joint area review in 2007. For example, information technology is used well by social workers to help them in carrying out their work and good arrangements are in place to keep a check on the quality of social work practice. However, the criteria for referring children at risk of harm still vary in different parts of Hertfordshire. In addition high numbers of referrals and shortages of skilled staff are resulting in delays to the assessment of children's needs.

Further inspections have judged the local authority's fostering and adoption agencies as good and its private fostering arrangements as adequate. Four out of the five children's homes are good and one is outstanding. Current indicators show substantial improvements in the percentage of referrals to social care going on to the first stage of assessment, although performance remains just below the national figure. The timeliness of initial assessments of children in need has also improved. It is now significantly higher than in similar areas and is above the national figure. However the timeliness of core assessments remains just below average. Two serious case reviews have been undertaken during the period April 2007 to July 2009. The first was conducted inadequately and the conduct of the second was adequate. Most special schools and all pupil referral units are good or outstanding. Out of the six residential special schools one is outstanding, one is inadequate and the remaining four are good.

Performance against a very large majority of national indicators, including those for staying safe and enjoying and achieving, is in line with similar areas and nationally. The difference in the performance of children and young people whose circumstances make them vulnerable and others of the same age is larger than the national average. This is particularly noticeable for young people from lower income families who are not as successful in achieving level 3 qualifications, so fewer than average progress to higher education when they are aged 19.

The children's services rating is provided for the purpose of section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. The rating of local authority children's services will contribute significantly to the managing performance theme of each local authority's Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) organisational assessment and therefore to the score for each local authority overall.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small dot at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, CAA