

9 December 2010

Mr Dave Hill
Executive Director for Schools, Children and Families
Essex County Council
C226, County Hall
Market Road
Chelmsford, Essex
CM1 1QH

Dear Mr Hill

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.

Essex County Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's service assessment	Performs poorly (1)
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Children's services in Essex County Council continue to perform poorly.

The 2008 joint area review judged the safeguarding of children and young people in the county as inadequate. Lack of progress by the partnership in the year after the joint area review to address service deficiencies, was reflected in the Ofsted annual inspection of the local authority's front-line child protection service in October 2009. A recent full inspection of safeguarding arrangements found significant improvements have been made by the local authority. Nevertheless, weaknesses remain in the quality of assessment and planning within its child protection and children in need services. Consequently, the effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people are safe remains inadequate overall.

The large majority of all types of educational services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good. All of the residential special schools are good or better as are all but one of the special schools. However, slightly fewer pupil referral units are good than in the previous year. More childcare provision is good and less is inadequate. There has been little change to the number of good primary and secondary schools, which remains broadly in line with similar areas and the rest of England. The number of schools judged to be inadequate has risen sharply in the last year. Two primary schools and one secondary school were judged to be inadequate by the end of the academic year 2008/2009. This increased to eight primary schools and three secondary schools in 2009/2010. Both sixth form colleges are good or better, but not enough further education colleges are good. Provision for children in care is satisfactory. The local adoption agency is good and the fostering agency is satisfactory. Just over a third of the local authority's children's homes for those in care are good and two are inadequate.

National performance measures show a very large majority of outcomes are in line with averages for England or for similar areas, although relatively few are above. The educational achievement of very young children is improving only slowly. Eleven-year-olds from low-income families do better than their peers in similar authorities. However, 16-year-olds do not do so well; neither do 11- and 16-year-olds with special educational needs so the difference in their achievement and their peers in Essex is getting larger. Not enough 17-year-olds or young offenders take part in education or training.

Key areas for further development

- Continue to improve the quality of safeguarding.
- Improve the achievement of very young children.
- Reverse the increase in inadequate primary and secondary schools.

- Increase the rate of improvement of standards for 11-year-olds from low-income families and 11- and 16-year-olds with special educational needs.
- Increase participation in education and training by 17-year-olds and young offenders.

Outcomes for children and young people

Most local services and settings are good at encouraging children and young people to live healthy lives. However, not as many settings and services for children and young people whose circumstances have made them more vulnerable are as good as they could be. Local knowledge of how many mothers are still breast-feeding their babies at six weeks is as good as in similar areas; however, fewer mothers are doing so. Obesity levels among five-year-olds fell in the last year, but continue to rise among 11-year-olds. Many more primary and secondary aged children have school lunches than is the case in England as a whole. Services for children and young people with emotional or mental health difficulties have developed slowly in Essex. Nevertheless, for children in care, the range of this provision is good. Preventative healthcare for children in care is adequate, but the different primary care trusts vary in what they provide and the service is insufficiently resourced to meet needs. Parents of disabled children report they are less satisfied with services for their children than those in the rest of England. A recent inspection found the current system for ordering specialist equipment for their children is confusing and poorly understood by parents. The lack of a common transition process can lead to inappropriate health interventions for disabled young people aged 16 to 18.

Action by the local authority's social care services to identify and respond to safeguarding and protection needs has recently improved significantly, but still remains inadequate overall. Action taken to ensure that initial and core assessments, child protection enquiries and child protection plans are effective is still inadequate. Safeguarding arrangements are good or better in the majority of schools in Essex. A recent inspection found appropriate safeguarding arrangements are in place for children and young people who are educated at home. However, joint work across partner agencies for children and young people who are missing from home, care or school is underdeveloped. There are weaknesses in safeguarding arrangements in two of the local authority's 11 children's homes and in a further five homes the care for those who live there is satisfactory. The majority of children report they feel safe in their communities and most know where and how to access help if they need it. Partners have been successful in reducing the number of children killed or seriously injured on the roads, although this does vary considerably from year to year. Relatively low numbers of children are admitted to hospital because they have been injured either accidentally or deliberately.

Child carers, schools and colleges are generally good at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning. However, not enough children's homes are good in this area. The achievement of very young children, though improving, remains considerably lower than in similar areas. The gap between the lowest

achieving children and their peers is closing rapidly, but is still much wider than in similar areas. Test and examination results for 11- and 16-year-olds are broadly average and more schools are exceeding the minimum expected standards. However, pupils are still not making sufficient progress in approximately one in four secondary schools. Attendance continues to improve in both primary and secondary schools and fewer pupils are regularly absent from school.

Most schools and other settings are good at involving children and young people in decision making and their community, but not enough children's homes are good at this. Many children and young people in care are benefiting from opportunities to get involved in a range of activities and several have been supported to develop leadership skills. The number of young women under the age of 18 who become pregnant is falling at a faster rate than nationally. Re-offending rates have risen, but fewer young people are offending for the first time. Not enough young offenders take part in education or training and the proportion remains well below average. Their access to suitable accommodation has improved and is now better than in similar areas.

An average proportion of 16-year-olds continue with their education or training and although numbers for 17-year-olds have improved, they remain much lower than in similar areas. More 16- to 18-year-olds take no part in education, training or work than in similar areas and the number has risen for the last two years. Nineteen-year-olds in Essex obtain fewer qualifications than those in similar areas. In the last two years, the rate of improvement has increased so the difference is getting smaller. Good initiatives are in place to help young people in care and those leaving care obtain the necessary skills and qualifications to get and keep a job. A high proportion of those leaving care live in suitable accommodation and more take part in education and training than in similar areas. In 2009, 31 care leavers were at university, which is the highest number achieved by Essex.

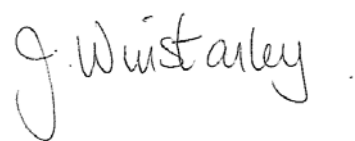
Prospects for improvement

Many outcomes for children and young people in Essex are improving. Obesity among five-year-olds has begun to fall, teenage pregnancies are reducing at a higher than average rate and attendance at school is improving. However, more schools are inadequate and improvements in educational attainment for very young children have not been fast enough and have slowed in recent years for 16-year-olds. The Children and Young People's Plan 2009 to 2011 fails to address and prioritise the seriousness of the failings in safeguarding services. The recent inspection of safeguarding judged capacity to improve as adequate, and good for provision for looked after children and young people. Within the council, the findings from the joint area review in 2008 were largely ignored even though safeguarding had been judged inadequate. Effective action was not taken at an early enough stage to address the deficits. Elected members did not accord safeguarding the priority it needed and did not hold officers sufficiently to account. This state of affairs was reflected across other partner agencies which then used it as a reason to withdraw from their own safeguarding responsibilities. However, the interim Director of Schools, Children and Families was able to demonstrate the significant level of

progress made since taking up the post in November 2009. Prior to November 2009, the lines of accountability and performance management were weak and insufficiently understood at all levels. This has now changed and robust reporting arrangements to the cabinet and scrutiny committees are in place. As a result of a statutory direction from the Secretary of State the local authority has an independently chaired Board to oversee improvement to which bi-monthly reports are made on performance against priorities.

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, reading "J. Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment