

9 December 2009

Mr Malcolm Newsam
Executive Director for Schools, Children and Families
Essex County Council
C226, County Hall
Market Road
Chelmsford
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Dear Mr Newsam

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 poorly (1)
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Children's services in Essex County Council perform poorly.

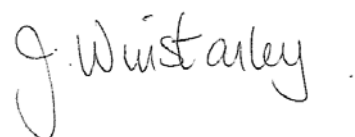
While the proportion of good educational provision in the county is broadly in line with that in similar areas and the national average, there are significant weaknesses in aspects of social care for children and young people.

Specialist provision and services for children and young people whose circumstances make them vulnerable are too variable in quality. The 2008 joint area review judged the safeguarding of children and young people in the county as inadequate. This judgement is pivotal to the overall rating for children's services. Following this inspection the local authority has received an improvement notice from the Department for Children, Schools and Families to address weaknesses in performance in safeguarding. Four serious case reviews have been undertaken in the period April 2007 to July 2009; three were conducted adequately and one inadequately. The local authority's adoption agency is good, as are its private fostering arrangements. Its fostering agency is adequate. However, the proportion of children's homes that are good or better is below similar areas and national averages. A very large proportion of the county's special schools and pupil referral units are good or outstanding. Post-16 provision in the two sixth form colleges in the county is good or outstanding, but only two out of the six further education colleges are good and one is inadequate.

Performance against a very large majority of national indicators is in line or above similar areas and national averages. The local authority does well in some areas of being healthy and making a positive contribution, including obesity among primary children aged 11 and young people's participation in sporting or arts activities or youth groups. There has been an improvement in the timeliness of initial and core assessments of children in need so performance is broadly average. There has also been a large reduction in the number of secondary schools that do not meet the government's minimum standards for examination results. However, it performs less well in other areas. For example, the low percentage of referrals to social care of children in need going onto initial assessment and the larger than average proportion of children who become the subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time. A greater proportion of young people continue their learning when they are 16, but too many have discontinued by the time they are 17 where the proportion is consistently well below average. A greater proportion of young people do not take part in education, employment or training than in similar areas. Pupils from low income families achieve relatively well when they are aged 11 and 16 compared with pupils in similar authorities, but not as well as in England as a whole. The joint area review in 2008 found good provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. However, the achievement gap for this group at age 11 is too wide.

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.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, CAA