

17 December 2010

Mr John Stephens
Director of Children and Young People's Services
Cheshire West and Chester Council
Nicholas Street, Chester
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Dear Mr Stephens

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.

Cheshire West and Chester Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs poorly (1)
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Children's services in Cheshire West and Chester Council perform poorly. In 2009 they performed well. However, the recent inspection of safeguarding services and services for looked after children judged the local authority's performance as inadequate for safeguarding. Capacity to improve is also inadequate. The inspection found that statutory requirements are not being met in important aspects of assessment and multi-agency child protection planning. As a direct consequence serious weaknesses in performance fail to provide effective safeguarding for some children whose circumstances have made them vulnerable. Services for looked after children and the local authority's capacity to improve these services are adequate.

The large majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. The children's centre is outstanding, as is the pupil referral unit, the sixth form college and one of the two further education colleges. The other further education college is good. Special schools run by the local authority are all good or better but provision in the independent sector is less good. Approximately two thirds of all secondary and sixth form schools are good but there is still too much satisfactory provision overall. A small amount of inadequate provision is found in nursery and early years settings, in two primary schools and one secondary school, which has now closed. Childcare is mostly good but about one third is satisfactory. Six of the eight children's homes are good and two are satisfactory; all four homes managed by the local authority are good but the local authority's fostering agency is only adequate. The very large majority of services and settings are good or better at helping children and young people achieve well in education and the majority of settings such as schools help them to stay safe.

As a relatively new unitary local authority, it is too early to judge performance across all of the national measures. Those that are in place show the very large majority of outcomes are in line with the averages for England or for similar areas. All educational attainment and progress measures are in line with similar areas. Outcomes for children aged five are good and results in national tests for 11-year-olds are in line with similar areas. Most 16-year-olds make broadly average progress and do as well as their peers in similar areas. Nineteen-year-olds from low-income families do not gain as many higher level qualifications as those from similar areas.

Key areas for further development

- Improve arrangements in social care services for safeguarding children and young people.
- Improve the quality of early years and childcare settings so that more are good or better.

- Improve the quality of secondary and secondary sixth form schools so that more are good or better.
- Improve educational outcomes for 19-year-olds from low-income families.

Outcomes for children and young people

Local arrangements to encourage children and young people to live healthy lives are successful in nearly all schools and settings. Fewer children are very overweight at the ages of five and 11 and there are a number of new initiatives in place to encourage them to be healthy, such as walking to school, taking up cycling and using low-cost leisure facilities. The proportion of young women under the age of 18 who become pregnant is lower than the national average but until recently progress in reducing the rate has been slow. The local authority is committed to tackling this issue by targeting resources to schools and health clinics in 'hot spot' areas, and local figures show a fall over the last year. Fewer 16-year-olds than in similar areas report that they have recently been drunk or taken drugs and specialist services have been set up to support looked after children at risk of substance misuse.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe in schools and settings are good. However, in September 2010 an unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found weaknesses in performance which failed to provide effective protection to some children whose circumstances have made them vulnerable. A subsequent announced inspection of safeguarding services has found on-going and significant weaknesses in the assessment of risk, the quality of multi-agency child protection planning and in the variability of practice and management. In particular, overall assessments do not provide a clear analysis of risk and the quality of child protection plans is poor so services fail to ensure positive outcomes for children and young people. Nevertheless, performance against national indicators, such as the timeliness of assessments has improved to be better than in similar areas and examples of good assessment and case planning have been identified. The overall effectiveness of services for looked after children are adequate and statutory requirements are being met. Timeliness of reviews has improved well and school attendances have also increased. Short-term placement stability, however, is below that found in similar local authorities.

Most settings and schools are good at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning. The local authority is mostly successful in its work to help schools get better although the overall effectiveness of five secondary schools is only satisfactory and one is inadequate. This school has now closed and become an Academy. Similarly, approximately one third of early years and childcare provision is only satisfactory. School Improvement Partners are working across the local authority to help improve all aspects of schooling and with a main focus on standards. Behaviour is good in the large majority of secondary schools. Results in early years settings, primary schools and secondary schools are good for the majority of children and young people and they do as well as, and sometimes better than,

their peers in similar areas. The local authority is aware of shortcomings in raising standards for children with special educational needs and for those from low-income families and has made closing the gaps in achievement between different groups a key priority in its planning.

Successful arrangements for involving children and young people in planning and reviewing local services are well-established. The Connexions service supports children and young people to have a say locally, for example in advising how money for youth activities is spent. Looked after children have their own Children in Care Council where they are consulted about issues that affect their lives and the Youth Parliament provides 11- to 18-year-olds with ways to share ideas and interests across neighbourhoods to influence local planning and activities. An inspection of the Cheshire Youth Offending Service in 2009 found re-offending to be worse than in similar areas but that the youth offending service was working reasonably well overall.

Numbers of young people who are not in education, work or training have increased slightly over the last year but are lower than in similar areas. The West Cheshire Area Together profile shows that the economic downturn has seen a 50% reduction in the number of jobs and training opportunities for the 16–19 age groups. In response, new initiatives involving the Princes Trust and the Connexions service have been set up to offer other ways to get work. More 17-year-olds continue in education and training than in similar areas and many young people gain good GCSE or equivalent qualifications by the age of 19. Fewer 19-year-olds gain higher qualifications and those from low-income families do less well than their peers in similar areas. This is a key priority for improvement. Too few care leavers are supported in appropriate work or training although nearly all are helped to find accommodation that meets their needs.

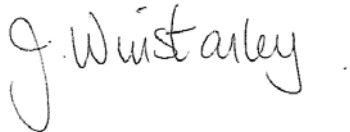
Prospects for improvement

In a number of outcome areas the local authority performs well and good progress is being made for children and young people. The local authority and its partners focus well on improving universal services, such as schools and colleges, while maintaining good performance in the more specialist services, such as special schools and children's homes. Ofsted's monitoring visits to weaker schools show that the local authority is doing effective work to help raise standards and its role in planning for the new academy has been valued by the schools involved. More work is required to improve provision that is satisfactory, for example to ensure more secondary and secondary sixth form schools become good or better, and to enable young people aged 19 from low-income families to attain higher educational standards. However, the local authority and its partners are failing to ensure that all children and young people at risk of significant harm are safe. Capacity to improve in this respect is also inadequate. Performance management is inconsistent and the scrutiny of child protection and children in need assessments and plans is not good enough. The local authority is acting promptly and positively to re-affirm its commitment and determination to improve services for children who are most at risk and there is strong commitment also from partner agencies at strategic level to work closely to

improve key areas of delivery. Nevertheless, in the light of the serious weaknesses found in the recent announced inspection of safeguarding the overall children's services assessment in 2010 is performs poorly.

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