

9 December 2010

Mrs Lorraine Butcher
Director of Children's Services
Cheshire East Council
Westfields, Middlewich Road
Sandbach, Cheshire,
CW11 1HZ

Dear Mrs Butcher

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 East Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs well (3)
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Children's services in Cheshire East Council perform well.

The very large majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. The very little inadequate provision includes a minority of childcare provision, one secondary school and one primary school, while a quarter of secondary schools are only satisfactory. Much childcare provision is good and the nursery school is outstanding, but one third of childminders are only satisfactory. Primary, secondary and special schools are mostly good, as are colleges, including the independent specialist college, and sixth forms in schools. The local fostering agency is adequate and the two local authority children's homes are good. Five children's homes managed by private companies are also good. Nearly all services and settings ensure children and young people enjoy their time in school and the large majority ensure they are safe.

A recent unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found a number of strengths and some areas for development. There were no areas for priority action.

As a relatively new unitary authority it is too early to judge performance across many of the national measures. However, those which are in place show the very large majority of all outcomes to be in line with or above the averages for England or similar areas. This is also the case for all measures of educational attainment and progress. Children do very well in their early years at school and results in national tests at the end of primary school have improved; they are slightly better than those for 11-year-olds in similar areas. More 16-year-olds achieve good examination results than their peers in similar authorities but those from low-income families or with special educational needs do less well. Higher numbers of children have frequent poor attendance in secondary schools than in similar areas. Slightly fewer 19-year-olds from low-income families gain as many higher level qualifications as their peers from similar areas and the gap is not reducing.

Key areas for further development

- Increase the number of secondary schools that are good or better.
- Improve attendance rates of those children who are frequently absent from school.
- Improve achievement for young people aged 16 years and 19 years 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 most schools and settings, with the exception of the local authority fostering agency which provides satisfactory arrangements. Good progress has been made in reducing the numbers of children aged five and 11 years old that are very overweight and this continues to be a key priority of the local authority. Take-up of school lunches in primary and secondary schools is much higher than in similar authorities. More children report that they have good relationships with their family and friends than elsewhere and services for children and young people with emotional and mental health difficulties are good. The proportion of young women under the age of 18 who become pregnant is lower than elsewhere, although rates are not falling fast enough in some parts of the local area.

Overall, arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are good; Ofsted's inspections of settings, schools and colleges confirm this. However, the local fostering agency is weaker. In its Children and Young Peoples Plan the local authority recognises that more joined up working is needed to reduce the numbers of children going in to care. In the recent unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services, decision making and allocation of work was judged to be effective and staff received good levels of support. Some weaknesses were identified; for example, timely assessments of children referred to social care services were too variable and management oversight of some of this work was patchy. Local children in need data confirm that numbers of referrals going on to initial assessment are much lower than the national average, timeliness of assessments is below average and performance on reviews for children in care is poor overall. One of the local authority's children's homes was found to be inadequate earlier in the year but a recent inspection found strong improvement and it is now good. Bullying is taken very seriously and anti-bullying strategies have been introduced in all local authority children's settings.

All settings, schools and colleges are good at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning. The local authority is providing good support to those schools that need it most. Primary schools do well in helping most children to reach a good standard in English and maths before they go to secondary school. The achievement of the majority of young people in secondary school is good and this is evident in their results. By the age of 16, more than half of young people gain five or more good GCSEs. This is better than similar areas. The majority of secondary schools are good, but five, a quarter of secondary schools, are only satisfactory and one is inadequate. There is a wide gap in achievement between 16-year-olds from low-income families and their peers. The local authority is aware that children with special educational needs do not always do as well as other pupils and is committed to improving services to meet their needs. Behaviour is almost always good in secondary schools although the number of secondary schools pupils who are often absent is higher than similar areas.

Good arrangements are in place for involving children and young people in planning and reviewing local services. For example, through the Youth Parliament several thousand young people have been given the opportunity to raise issues and

influence decision making at local level. The voluntary sector is a key partner in increasing positive activities for children and young people in the local community, although the numbers involved are lower than similar areas. The local authority considers this targeted action to be an important strategy in reducing the numbers of young people who offend for the first time and who re-offend. Re-offending by young people in Cheshire is worse than in similar areas but by most measures the youth offending service works reasonably well.

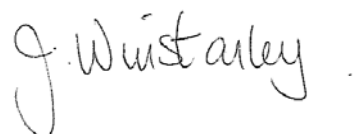
The quality of education and training after the age of 16 is of a good standard overall. All three colleges are good or outstanding, as are the majority of secondary sixth forms. Most young people receive good information, advice and support through the Connexions service for identifying the skills and qualifications needed for future jobs. This is reflected well by the low numbers of young people who are not in education, work or training, which compares well with similar areas. The majority of care leavers are supported to find suitable jobs or training and more in finding appropriate accommodation. The local authority knows that young people from low-income families achieve less well than their peers by the age of 19 and this is a key priority for improvement.

Prospects for improvement

Children's services in Cheshire East have made good progress and continue to perform well. Most outcomes that have been measured are good and improving but children in need outcomes are less positive. The local authority's interim Children and Young People's Plan shows good understanding of the key issues affecting children and young people. Plans are clear and targets to improve services are realistic. The recent inspection of front-line child protection services found satisfactory practice overall with some areas for development, including: the need for a better overview of services, monitoring of practice, and quality assurance to improve upon weak performance that is also reflected in the most recent data returns. Inspection reports of the weaker schools show that the local authority is doing well in helping them get better but there is still more to do to improve the quality of satisfactory and inadequate provision and the achievement of some of its young people whose circumstances have made them most vulnerable. The youth offending service is performing adequately against national standards and has a good capacity to improve performance.

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, flowing style.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment