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Ms Gladys Rhodes OBE  
Strategic Director of Children's Services  
Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council  
The Exchange  
Ainsworth Street  
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Dear Ms Rhodes

## 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.

## Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs well (3)
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Children's services in Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council perform well. In 2009, a transitional year, the local authority was assessed as performing excellently. However, in 2010 there has been a slight decline in standards and performance and it no longer meets the minimum requirements for that grade.

The large majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. These include nursery and primary schools, most secondary schools, the further education college, the sixth form college and sixth forms in schools. The quality of early years and childcare provision has improved since 2009 so that more is good or better although there is still too much that is only satisfactory. Two of the three local authority maintained special schools are good, as is one of the two pupil referral units. One special school, with a small secondary sixth form, and one pupil referral unit have recently been judged to be satisfactory which shows a decline in performance. An independent special school is only satisfactory. The local authority fostering agency is good and its adoption agency outstanding. All five of the children's homes for those children and young people who are looked after by the local authority are good or better, and of the five managed by private and voluntary agencies two are good, two are satisfactory and one is inadequate. The local authority currently places three children in care in a good independent fostering agency within the borough. The very large majority of services and settings are good or better at helping children and young people stay safe and achieve well at school.

An unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services in October 2010 found much that was good or satisfactory and no areas for priority action. The joint area review published in 2009 judged services for looked after children and safeguarding arrangements to be good.

National performance measures show that a very large majority of outcomes are in line with or above the averages for England or similar areas, including all educational attainment and progress indicators. The majority of children do very well in their early years' education and well above the average elsewhere for this age group. This has improved markedly since last year. Results in national tests at the age of 11 and 16 show children and young people do as well as their peers in similar areas, although standards for 16-year-olds have dipped slightly in 2009 and remain well below the national average. The gap in achievement between those aged 11 with special educational needs and all other pupils is wider than elsewhere. Given the high numbers of children and young people from low-income families, good progress has been made in closing the achievement gap between this group and all pupils at the age of five, 11 and 19. At the age of 16 the gap is narrower than similar areas and nationally but progress has slowed in the last year.

#### Key areas for further development

- Improve the quality of provision for children and young people with special educational needs and for those who are placed in the pupil referral unit.
- Improve early years and childcare settings so that more are good or better.
- Improve and sustain educational outcomes for 16-year-olds.

### **Outcomes for children and young people**

Local arrangements to encourage children and young people to live healthy lives are almost always effective. All schools and children's homes are very successful in promoting good health, although childminders do not do as well. There are steady reductions in the numbers of very overweight children of Reception age and in Year six which underlines good success from action to target obesity. Although children are satisfied with the parks and play spaces available for their use there has been a slight decrease in the number taking part in high quality sports and physical education. The number of young women under the age of 18 who become pregnant is falling at a faster rate than nationally. Improved sexual health services for young people continue to be a key priority within the Children and Young Peoples Plan. The effectiveness of child and adolescent mental health services has not improved fast enough but activities such as the Health Emotions for Life project which supports children with mental health needs is recording positive outcomes as a result of its targeted work.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are very good in all settings with the exception of childminding provision, where too much practice is only satisfactory. Ofsted's inspections confirm that staying safe outcomes are strong and the latest data showing outcome measures for children in need shows sustained performance in most areas. The unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found good and satisfactory practice with fewer areas for development. Local services are highly effective and work well together to protect children at risk of harm. Good support services are available to families before and after formal intervention and for those families experiencing domestic violence, very strong multi-agency systems are in place to help. The quality of assessments however is too variable and the level of repeat referrals is high. Some case loads in first response and duty teams are excessive and in some instances complex cases, which require clear lines of accountability, lack clarity and consistency in decision-making. Bullying, road safety and on-line computer safety are identified by the local authority as primary safeguarding concerns and there are successful programmes across schools and in communities to address these issues. There are some weaknesses in the arrangements for ensuring that children are safe within the community. For example, hospital admissions caused by unintentional or deliberate injuries, although reduced, are higher than the national average.

Nearly all nurseries, primary schools, secondary schools and colleges are successful at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning. The two inadequate primary schools and five other schools which are not achieving the minimum standards for 11-year-olds receive good support and are improving over time. Children at the Early Years Foundation Stage make very good progress from a low starting point and better than their peers in similar areas. By the time they reach 11-years-old, most achieve a standard appropriate for their age matching that of their peers in similar areas. Those children with special educational needs however do less well at this age. Standards for the majority of 16-year-olds have increased over the last three years from a very low baseline and compare well with similar areas, though these are still below the national average. Provision in one secondary special school with a sixth form and one of the pupil referral units has declined since last year and both are now only satisfactory. The secondary special school caters for young people up to the age of 19 years and by the time they leave the school, usually at 19, the most able students gain satisfactory results in nationally accredited courses. Behaviour is good in most secondary schools and the number of pupils frequently absent from school are falling year-on-year. Children from some minority ethnic groups do not do as well as others at the age of 16, but the development of 'language for learning and for life' is having notable success in closing the gap between minority ethnic pupils and their peers.

An inspection in 2009 found the youth offending service to be working well to reduce offending by children and young people. First-time offending rates continue to fall steadily as a result of targeted activities run by several partnerships in local communities. Permanent exclusions from school have continued to reduce over time. Young people's involvement in positive activities has declined in the past year. The local authority is concerned about whether the current services are meeting the needs of those young people who are more difficult to engage and has identified this area as a key priority in its review of youth provision.

The local authority provides outstanding support for young people as they prepare to leave school and the number of those not in education, work or training continue to fall at a faster rate than similar areas. Good partnership working has ensured continuing success in providing support for the most vulnerable groups when they leave school, such as through apprenticeships in the public sector. However, fewer care leavers are able to find suitable work or training than previously although all are helped to find accommodation that meets their needs. A high number of 17-year-olds continue in further education, which is of a very good standard overall, or training. By the age of 19, the number of young people achieving good GCSE or equivalent qualifications continues to increase to levels that are much better than elsewhere.

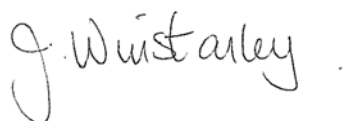
### **Prospects for improvement**

Most outcomes for children and young people living in Blackburn with Darwen are good or improving, although there has been a slight decline in performance during the past year. However, the local authority's review of its Children and Young People's Plan demonstrates good progress in important areas. Highly effective partnership working is demonstrated through continuing improvements especially in

social care and education services. Commitment from all partners is strong and the desire to drive improvement forward, enable better co-ordination of services and provide value-for-money is clear. The recent inspection of front-line child protection services judged multi-agency working to be of a consistently good standard and found that very high confidence levels are expressed by partner agencies in the children's social care referral processes. Action is being taken to revise decision-making arrangements across social work teams. An Ofsted survey reviewing young people not in education, work or training commended the strong engagement and commitment demonstrated by elected members, senior local authority officers, partners and staff. Good and sustained progress has been made in closing the gap in achievement between the majority of pupils and those who are vulnerable. More must be done to improve childcare which is only satisfactory and to ensure special education provision and the pupil referral units are of a consistently good standard.

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