

9 December 2010

Mr Chris Hilliard
Executive Director of Children's Services, Schools and Families
Bedford Borough Council
Borough Hall, Cauldwell Street
Bedford, MK42 9AP

Dear Mr Hilliard

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.

Bedford Borough Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs adequately (2)
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Children's services in Bedford Borough Council perform adequately. In 2009, a transitional year, children's services were assessed as performing well. However, in 2010, performance data, especially that relating to educational outcomes, reduces the rating to 'performs adequately'. This information was not available in 2009 as Bedford Borough was a newly formed unitary authority.

The large majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. For example, the further education college is outstanding, as are most special schools. The pupil referral unit is good. Most early years and childcare provision is good or better. The overall effectiveness of five of the seven upper schools is good or better. Almost all lower schools are at least good and a third of them are outstanding. However, middle schools and sixth forms are not doing as well. Inspections show that although seven of the 15 middle schools are good or outstanding, another seven are only satisfactory and one, inspected during the last year, is failing to provide a satisfactory quality of education. Only three of the seven school sixth forms are good or better. One of the two private and voluntarily run children's homes in the area has improved and both are now good.

A recent unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found a number of strengths in provision for children whose circumstances have made them vulnerable and their families, including the effective way cultural difference and needs of those with disabilities are taken into account during the assessment process. Although some important areas for development were highlighted, none were considered to put children whose circumstances have made them vulnerable at risk.

National performance measures show outcomes are usually in line with the averages for England or for similar areas. However, almost all indicators illustrating educational attainment are below similar areas. Achievement at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage is low and children between the ages of seven and 11 do not progress as quickly as those elsewhere. Results in national tests and examinations, although improving, are below similar areas for 11- and 16-year-olds. Those from low-income families do not do as well as their peers elsewhere. However, by the age of 19, more young people achieve good qualifications than both similar areas and national averages.

Key areas for further development

- Raise achievement at 11 and 16 years.
- Improve outcomes for those from low-income families.
- Increase the level of challenge to those middle schools not yet judged to be good.

Outcomes for children and young people

Local arrangements to encourage children and young people to live healthy lives are usually successful. Almost all schools and colleges are good at this, as are about three quarters of childminders and childcare providers. Local action is focused on ensuring babies get the best start in life, including increasing the number of mothers who breast-feed. Tackling the number of children who are too overweight is a priority for the local authority and its partners as the proportion of five- and 11-year-olds that are obese is higher than similar areas. More children and young people feel they have good relationships with friends and family than found elsewhere, but the local authority's own assessment shows that more work needs to be done to provide access to a comprehensive emotional and mental health service. High numbers of children say they enjoy playing in local parks and play areas compared to the rest of England. The number of young women under the age of 18 who become pregnant is falling at a similar rate to elsewhere and fewer 16-year-olds report that they have recently been drunk or taken drugs.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are almost always good. Ofsted inspections of schools and colleges confirm this. Local services work well together to protect children at risk of harm and are aware of the need to tackle specific issues such as young people who self-harm. Local plans reflect a 'think family' approach and the need to tackle child poverty to further promote the safety and well-being of all children and young people. Recent data illustrate good performance in the number of core and initial assessments completed within the expected timescales. There are strengths in the plans to promote safety in the home and on the roads and a range of actions are identified to address bullying in schools and local communities. The number of young people reporting that they have experienced bullying is no greater than found elsewhere.

A large majority of child carers, nursery and primary schools are good at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning. Provision in pupil referral units and special schools is always good. Behaviour in almost all secondary schools is good and lower numbers of pupils are absent from school than found elsewhere. Although the overall provision in primary schools is often good, too few help children to make as much progress as they should. At the end of primary school children do not do as well in national tests as those elsewhere. However, the 2010 national tests results demonstrate the gap with the national average is closing. Standards in secondary schools are rising and provisional results in 2010 illustrate that, by the age of 16, just over a half of young people gain five or more good GCSEs including English and mathematics. In secondary schools, pupils with special educational needs and those from low-income families do not do as well as similar groups nationally.

There is a clear commitment to involving children and young people in local decision making and planning how to improve local services and provision. Almost all schools and other settings are good at involving young people in decision making and activity in their communities. Although there is no current data for Bedford Borough, the local authority is concerned to reduce youth crime and lists as priorities the reduction

of first time entrants to the youth justice system, re-offending and a reduction in anti-social behaviour.

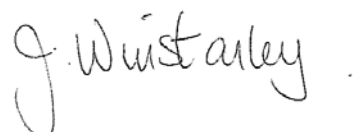
The local authority is aware of the impact of poverty on outcomes and is focusing efforts to extend learning opportunities at home, in the community and at school to improve the economic well-being of all young people. More young people achieve good qualifications at the age of 19 than elsewhere. Most receive good support to gain the skills and qualifications needed for future jobs, although secondary schools are not consistently good in this area. Appropriate targets have been set to increase the number of young people participating in education or work post-16. More care leavers and young mothers are in education, work or training compared to the national average.

Prospects for improvement

Almost all provision for children and young people in Bedford Borough is adequate and is often good or better. Since the new authority was formed rigorous action has been taken to improve outcomes for children and young people. For example, sure start centres have opened across the Borough, weaker schools have been supported and attainment of those from minority ethnic groups has improved. The commitment to tackling low educational attainment is reflected in the council's robust approach to getting agreement to move from the current three tier system of lower, middle and upper schools to a two tier structure of primary and secondary schools. Most recent results illustrate improvement in attainment of 11- and 16-year-olds. The Children and Young People's Plan demonstrates a good awareness of the most important areas to be tackled and is clear about what still needs to be done to improve outcomes further. The Children's Trust has been recognised for achieving challenging targets, but targets in the Children and Young People's Plan are too general to illustrate the pace of future improvements. Good partnership working is demonstrated in plans and actions taken to tackle child poverty and social care provision. There are clear performance management arrangements and the recent inspection of front-line child protection services found information is regularly gathered and used to inform service development.

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 "J. Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment