

8 November 2011

Mr Dave Hill
Executive Director for Schools, Children and Families
Essex County Council
Schools, Children and Families Directorate
C226, County Hall
Market Road
Chelmsford, Essex
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Dear Mr Hill

Annual children's services assessment

Ofsted guidance published in April 2011 explains that the annual assessment of children's services is derived from the performance profile of the quality of services 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 other published data.

In reaching the assessment of children's services, Ofsted has taken account of inspection outcomes including the arrangements for making sure children are safe and stay safe and performance against similar authorities and/or 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 2010, 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.

Essex County Council children's services assessment 2011

Children's services assessment	Performs adequately (2)
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Children's services in Essex County Council perform adequately. This reflects satisfactory progress in addressing the areas of concern identified in safeguarding services that limited the 2009 and 2010 assessments to performs poorly. The overall effectiveness of safeguarding services is now adequate. In March 2011 an unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children in need and children who may be in need of protection reported that areas of development from the previous unannounced inspection in October 2009 had been addressed. A full inspection of services for safeguarding in September 2011 identified significant improvements since the inadequate judgement of June 2010. Although the impact of all the improvements to services has yet to be fully realised children and young people at immediate risk of significant harm are now identified in a timely manner.

The large majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. Most provision supports children and young people well in staying safe and the large majority helps them to enjoy their learning. Areas of strength remain as last year. As found elsewhere, changes to secondary provision are taking place and some secondary schools have become academies. Previous inspection judgments for these schools have been taken into account in the assessment. A number of infant and junior schools have amalgamated to become primary schools. There has been some progress in the key areas for further improvement identified in last year's assessment.

Strengths

- Early years and childcare continues to improve and the large majority is at least good. The very large majority of regulated childcare provision is now good or outstanding. Eight of 11 children's centres inspected for the first time are good and none are inadequate.
- For children under five, the large majority of provision in nurseries and primary schools continues to be good and some is outstanding. However, inspections during the last year reflect an increase in the proportion judged only satisfactory.
- The majority of secondary schools including those that have become academies are good or better. The large majority of secondary schools inspected in the last year sustained the same grade or improved. Most and increasing numbers of secondary schools have good or outstanding standards of behaviour and poor attendance of some young people is reducing steadily. With appropriate support and challenge from the local authority two previously inadequate schools have improved and are now satisfactory. Standards achieved by 16-year-olds improve over time at a

rate similar to that found nationally and are in line with both similar areas and national averages.

- Specialist provision is usually good or better. Almost all local authority special schools are at least good with eight of 17 schools being outstanding. Almost all secondary special sixth forms are good or better and all three of the residential special schools are now outstanding. For looked after children, six of ten local authority children's homes are good or better as are the large majority of private and voluntary run homes commissioned by the council for children in their care. The local authority adoption agency is good, so too are the very large majority of independent fostering agencies used by the council. A higher proportion of looked after children attain Level 4 in both English and mathematics tests at the age of 11 years than found elsewhere and by 16 years-old those attaining five A* to C grades in GCSE including English and mathematics matches that found in similar areas.
- The proportion of 16-year-olds from low-income families and minority ethnic groups attaining five A* to C grades in GCSE examinations including English and mathematics is higher than their peers in similar authorities.
- The majority of provision for learning after the age of 16 is at least good and none is now inadequate. The proportion of 19-year-olds achieving level 2 and level 3 qualifications is in line with national averages. The gap in achievement between 19-year-olds from low-income families achieving level 2 qualifications and their peers in Essex is reducing at a slightly quicker rate than found nationally.

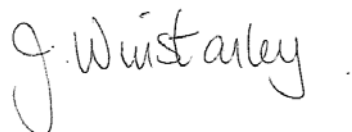
Areas for further improvement

- An area for improvement from last year's assessment was to reduce the number of inadequate primary schools. This has not been achieved and the numbers that are unsatisfactory has continued to rise. Once Ofsted inspection identifies a school as being in a category of concern subsequent monitoring reports show that the local authority provides good support to tackle weaknesses.
- Although improving, the proportion of six-year-olds with good levels of development at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage continues to be below similar areas. This was also an area for improvement in last year's assessment.
- The overall good quality of provision in pupil referral units has not been sustained with two inspected during the year judged to be inadequate. However, one identified with serious weaknesses at the beginning of the year is making outstanding progress in raising achievement and improving the quality of provision. The other has subsequently closed and children and young people placed in other more effective provision.

- Sixteen-year-olds with special educational needs do not do as well in GCSE examinations as those with similar needs elsewhere. Most recent performance indicators reflect the gap with their peers in Essex is getting wider.

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, reading "J. Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment