

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 020 7421 6666
Direct F 020 7421 5633
Juliet.Winstanley@ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr Charlie MacNally
Director of Adult and Children's Services
Northamptonshire County Council
County Hall
George Row
Northampton
Northamptonshire NN1 1AY

Dear Mr MacNally

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.

Northamptonshire County Council children's services assessment 2011

Children's services assessment	Performs adequately (2)
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Children's services in Northamptonshire County Council perform adequately, as in 2010. The large majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. Almost all provision supports children well in staying safe and the large majority help them to enjoy their learning. Strengths remain as last year with further improvement in a number of areas. As found elsewhere, changes to secondary provision are taking place and more schools have become academies. Previous inspection judgements for these schools have been taken into account in the assessment. There has been some progress in the areas for further improvement identified in last year's assessment.

A recent full inspection of safeguarding and services for looked after children found both safeguarding arrangements and the provision for looked after children to be adequate with adequate capacity for further improvement. Satisfactory progress has been made in addressing the areas for development from the unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children in need and children who may be in need of protection carried out in October 2010. Improved attention is being paid to promoting equality and diversity when assessing children's needs.

Strengths

- The proportion of early years and childcare providers who are good or better has seen on-going improvement. Almost three-quarters of regulated childcare settings are at least good. Seven children's centres have been inspected for the first time and four are good. The proportion of five-year-olds achieving a good level of development continues to rise and performance is in line with similar areas and national averages
- The proportion of good or better primary schools is increasing. Three schools, previously in Ofsted categories of concern, have made good progress and are no longer failing to provide a satisfactory quality of education. Standards at the age of 11 are in line with similar areas but are not improving as quickly overtime as elsewhere and recent test results show a small decline in the proportion achieving the expected level in both English and mathematics.
- Specialist provision is almost always at least good and continues to improve. Three-quarters of the 12 special schools are now outstanding and almost all secondary special sixth forms are judged at least good. An inadequate pupil referral unit was closed during the year; of the remaining two, one is good and the other outstanding. There has been a recent increase in the proportion of young people with special educational needs

attaining five A* to C grade GCSEs including English and mathematics and the gap with their peers is closing.

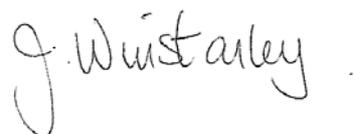
- Good progress has been made in improving local authority run children's homes and all but one are good or better with none now inadequate. The large majority of independently run homes used by the local authority to place children in their care are good or better. Looked after children make good progress in their primary school and results are particularly strong in English.

Areas for further improvement

- Most secondary schools and secondary sixth forms inspected since last year maintained or improved on previous performance. However, there continue to be too few secondary schools, including academies that are at least good. Less than a half of secondary schools are good or better, a much smaller proportion than found in similar areas and nationally. One inspected during the year was issued with a notice to improve as it requires significant improvement in order to raise standards. Ofsted monitoring visits to inadequate schools show the local authority's strong support and challenge enables those in need of significant improvement to address issues very quickly.
- Although showing continuing improvement, the proportion of young people gaining higher grade GCSEs at the age of 16 or qualifications at the age of 19 continues to be below similar areas and nationally. The proportion of those achieving level 3 qualifications by the age of 19 remains lower than that found elsewhere and the performance gap is wider than in similar areas. This was an area for further development in last year's assessment. Sixteen and 19-year-olds from low-income families do not do as well as those from similar backgrounds across the country.
- The needs of young people leaving care are not always planned for well enough and they have limited understanding of their pathway plans. The inspection of services for looked after children found the outcomes for young people leaving care to be inadequate.

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