

8 November 2011

Mr Gerald Meehan
Strategic Director of Children and Young People's Services
Cheshire West and Chester Council
Children and Young People's Services
County Hall
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Dear Mr Meehan

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.

Cheshire West and Chester Council children's services assessment 2011

Children's services assessment	Performs poorly (1)
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Children's services in Cheshire West and Chester Council perform poorly, as in 2010. In November 2010, a full inspection of safeguarding and services for looked after children judged safeguarding to be inadequate and subsequently children's services overall were assessed as performing poorly due to significant weaknesses in social care provision. The local authority's capacity to improve was also judged to be inadequate. In its recent self assessment, the local authority identifies significant improvements since the inspection, not least by way of achieving greater consistency in decision making and increased financial investment to fund improvements and build service capacity and sustainability. However, the local authority remains as performs poorly until further inspection evidence is available.

The weaknesses in safeguarding services at the time of the inspection were significant. Nevertheless, the large majority of settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or outstanding and there is very little inadequate provision. In 2010, the large majority of settings and institutions were good at helping children and young people to learn and to stay safe and this continues to be the case. Some progress has been made in the key areas for development identified in last year's assessment. As found elsewhere in the country, changes to provision are taking place and two secondary schools, one judged to be inadequate and the other satisfactory at their last inspections, merged in September 2010 to become a new sponsored academy. One outstanding primary school and two further secondary schools judged to be good at their last inspections have converted to academy status since last year. These inspection judgments have been taken into account in this year's assessment.

Strengths

- Most early years and childcare settings are good or better. The achievement of very young children at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage has declined since 2009, but remains in line with similar areas and the national average. The percentage of young children from low-income families achieving a good level of development has stabilised yet remains below that in similar areas. The gap however between this group and all other young children has narrowed in the last two years and is now smaller than in similar areas.
- The large majority of nursery and primary schools are good or better which has improved marginally since 2010. Three primary schools are in a category of concern and all have made satisfactory progress. One previously inadequate primary school was recently judged to be good. Inspection monitoring reported that the school received good support

from the local authority which offers consistently clear challenge and helpful review and evaluation. Provisional results for 2011 in national tests at age 11 show attainment remains the same as in 2010 at 77%, which is above the national average.

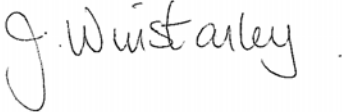
- All but two secondary schools are good or better. This shows sustained performance since 2010. Most young people continue to achieve well in gaining five A* to C grades at GCSE level including English and mathematics at age 16 and make good progress compared with their peers in similar areas and nationally. More 16-year-olds from low-income families are achieving good GCSEs than previously, although numbers are still lower than elsewhere. Provisional GCSE results for 2011 also demonstrate that looked after children achieved better results than in 2010.
- As in 2010, for young people continuing in education or training after the age of 16, the very large majority of colleges and school sixth forms are good or outstanding. By the age of 19, the percentage of young people achieving level 2 qualifications, the equivalent of five A* to C grades at GCSE and achieving higher qualifications, the equivalent of two good A levels, has increased year on year. The gap at level 2 between young people from low-income families and their peers is reducing faster than in similar areas but at level 3, the gap is significantly wider than similar areas and nationally.
- The very large majority of special schools and the pupil referral unit are now good or outstanding. One secondary special sixth form is satisfactory as is the one independent special school. Performance overall shows improvement since 2010, assisted by the closure of two settings, an independent special school and a residential school, which were both judged inadequate in the most recent inspections.

Areas for further improvement

- Serious weaknesses in services to safeguard the most vulnerable children and young people that were identified in the most recent safeguarding and looked after children services inspection in November 2010, require improvements in quality, consistency and sustainability. The local authority in its recent self assessment demonstrates a wide range of work in progress to address these issues.
- Three of the six children's homes, including those commissioned by the local authority, are satisfactory, as is the local authority fostering agency and one of the two commissioned adoption and fostering agencies.
- At the age of 16, young people who have special educational needs continue to be a high priority for the local authority and more are now achieving in line with their peers in Cheshire West and Chester. Although the achievement gap has reduced, it is still wider than elsewhere.

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 style with a period at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment