

9 December 2010

Mr Tony Howell
Strategic Director of Children, Young People and Families
Birmingham City Council
Council House Extension
Margaret Street
Birmingham B3 3BU

Dear Mr Howell

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.

Birmingham City Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs poorly (1)
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Children's services in Birmingham perform poorly. Although many providers are successful at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning, and the majority of services and settings for children whose circumstances have made them vulnerable are good or better, the most recent inspection of safeguarding found that safeguarding services were inadequate.

Safeguarding for children and young people whose circumstances have made them most vulnerable, remains an important area of concern. Despite focused work by local authority leaders and improvement in a small number of external indicators, the quality of services remains inconsistent and not enough has been done to tackle long-standing weaknesses. Services for children in care are adequate. Local authority fostering and adoption services are good, and the quality of provision in local authority children's homes has improved in the last year with 16 of the 19 homes judged to be good at their most recent inspection and three inadequate homes closed. Provision in private and voluntary children's homes in the city is mixed, with only a third judged good or better at their most recent inspection, though there are no longer any inadequate homes. The quality of early years settings, childcare and nursery schools is good. Provision in special schools up to the age of 18 is good and two of the four pupil referral units are good. However, the quality of primary schools is more variable with 15 of the 299 primary schools placed in a category of concern at their most recent inspection, including nine in the academic year 2009/2010. During the same period nine primary schools and three secondary schools were also removed from a category of concern. There are no inadequate secondary schools. For students over the age of 16 in school sixth forms, sixth form colleges or further education colleges, the quality of provision varies with just over a half of settings graded good or better, though none is inadequate.

National performance measures show that most outcomes for children and young people are similar to or above the averages for England or for similar areas. Educational outcomes are generally similar to those in other local authorities at the age of 11 and 16, where there has been a steady rate of improvement. By the age of 19 a higher proportion of young people leave education with five higher grade GCSEs or two A level qualifications or their equivalent than in similar authorities. Fewer young people go on to re-offend than in similar areas. However, the local authority's own evaluation of the effectiveness of its services for children and young people with emotional or mental health difficulties is less positive than in similar areas.

Key areas for further development

- Take urgent action to tackle the weaknesses identified in the recent inspection of safeguarding and looked after children.
- Improve the number of primary and secondary schools that are good or better.
- With partners, improve the consistency of the quality of post-16 provision by increasing the number of school sixth forms and colleges which are judged to be good or better in inspection.

Outcomes for children and young people

Local arrangements to encourage children and young people to live healthy lives are almost always successful. Children are generally healthy with good promotion of health lifestyles in schools and other inspected services. Strengths include the take-up of school lunches in primary schools and children and young people's continuing satisfaction with the quality of parks and play areas. The percentage of children who are obese at the age of 11 fell in 2008/2009, and is now broadly in line with similar areas. A recent inspection of safeguarding and looked after children's services found that services to promote the health of looked after children are inadequate. There is no overall strategic plan for the health care of looked after children. For those looked after children placed within the Birmingham area, effective health promotion activity is carried out by the nurses during health assessment reviews. Provision for children placed outside Birmingham is less good.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are inadequate overall. The recent inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services found that not all children are being safeguarded and protected, although there are pockets of good practice. In addition weaknesses in, or absence of, performance management data result in information about safeguarding and child protection cases not being monitored or evaluated. Children in care are adequately safeguarded and placements are more stable than those for children in similar local authorities. A range of supportive services is in place to prevent breakdown. Effective action is taken to trace and recover missing children in care. Local authority-run services and settings are all judged as having good safeguarding practices and there are no children placed in residential settings where safeguarding has been judged by Ofsted as inadequate.

Child carers, nurseries, primary, secondary and special schools and colleges are successful at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning. Children's educational achievement is satisfactory overall. A third of secondary schools in Birmingham are outstanding, yet just over a further third are only adequate. The city has fewer good or better primary schools, pupil referral units or sixth form colleges than is the case in other areas. Overall, children's educational achievement is in line with that in similar parts of the country and in the last five

years has improved at ages five, 11 and 16 at a similar rate to the national picture. Most young people behave well at school and absence rates are falling in line with England averages. Children in care are supported well and standards are rising.

Mechanisms to involve children and young people in the decision-making process are well-developed and groups whose circumstances have made them vulnerable are well involved, for example through the Disabled Children's Strategy and the network of 12 young people's decision-making groups across the city. Young people in the care system have significant opportunities to contribute to their plans, where necessary with the support of advocates. The developing Children in Care Council is an effective vehicle for gathering children's views to put to the local authority and then to provide feedback. The number of children and young people who participate in positive activities is in line with the England average. Teenage conception rates continue to fall at a similar rate to nationally and fewer 16-year-olds report that they have recently been drunk or taken drugs than elsewhere, a reduction on the previous year. Rates of permanent exclusions have fallen over the last three years, although remain slightly higher than national figures. The numbers of first-time entrants to the youth justice system is broadly similar to that nationally and there are fewer cases of proven re-offending.

Most settings and services are good or better in helping children and young people develop the skills and attitudes required for securing work and achieving economic well-being in the future. More young people in Birmingham achieve good qualifications by the age of 19 than in similar areas. The participation rate in education and training at the age of 17 is satisfactory, though the number of care leavers represented in this group is lower than that across the country. Planning for transition to adult services for care leavers with complex needs has improved over the last three years, with effective personalised planning. Young offenders are more likely to carry on into education, work or training than in similar local authorities.

Prospects for improvement

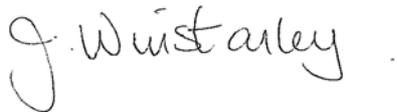
Outcomes for children and young people in Birmingham are generally in line and in some cases better than those in similar areas or nationally. The local authority has been successful in raising educational standards for many over the last five years, with the number of secondary schools which did not meet minimum educational standards falling significantly in that period. However, fifteen primary schools are currently inadequate. In the last year the city has also succeeded in improving the quality of the local authority children's homes and the local authority fostering service, as well as starting to demonstrate better management of the large number of complex serious case reviews.

However, the recent inspection of safeguarding services identified that the capacity for improvement is currently inadequate. Despite a concerted effort by the local authority over the last two years, serious deficiencies in management and practice remain and are not properly addressed by current plans or a co-ordinated shared approach across the partnership. The local authority was issued with a government Improvement Notice and has set up an independently chaired board to monitor the

improvement work. The priorities in the Children and young People's Plan 2011-14 demonstrate a secure understanding of what needs to be done further, notably the need to protect children from harm and improve children's social care, improve engagement in learning and education and skills, and reduce health inequalities. The plan also describes actions planned and underway to tackle identified weaknesses.

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 large initial 'J' and a period at the end.

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment