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Mr David Armstrong
Interim Director of Children's Services
Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council
Hamilton Building, Conway Street
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Dear Mr Armstrong

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.

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs well (3)
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Children's services in Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council continue to perform well.

The large majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. There is very little inadequate provision. Nursery and primary settings are mostly good or better, as are nearly all secondary schools, special schools and the pupil referral unit. About one quarter of nursery and primary schools, however, are satisfactory. Childcare provision is good in two thirds of settings but this leaves approximately one third which is only satisfactory or worse. Most provision for learning after the age of 16 is good, including the further education college, but five settings made up of four sixth form schools and the sixth form college are satisfactory. Children's homes within the local authority are mostly good or better; of the three homes managed by the local authority, one is good and two are satisfactory. Local authority fostering arrangements are good but adoption arrangements are satisfactory. Nearly all services and settings are good or better at helping children and young people achieve well in their education and most at keeping them safe.

An unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found much that was strong and no areas requiring urgent action. Satisfactory action has been taken to address the issues identified in the inspection of private fostering arrangements in 2008.

National performance measures show the very large majority of outcomes to be in line with or above the averages for England or for similar areas. This is also the case for educational attainment and progress indicators. Test and examination results for children and young people aged 11 and 16 years are good and in line with similar areas. These continue to improve year on year. At 11 years old children with special educational needs do better than their peers nationally and at 16 years old achieve in line with the national average. However, as more children and young people achieve better results, the gap between the majority and those from low-income families is getting wider. The number of 16- to 18-year-olds not in education, work or training is reducing slowly in line with similar areas and more 17-year-olds stay on in training or education than in similar authorities.

Key areas for further development

- Improve early years and childcare settings so that more are good or better.
- Improve further the achievement of 16-year-olds from low-income families.

- Improve the local arrangements for adoption.

Outcomes for children and young people

Local arrangements to encourage children and young people to live healthy lives are almost always successful and do as well as those in similar areas. Nearly all schools and settings are good at this, although childminders do not do as well. Childhood obesity is being closely monitored by the local authority and levels recorded for reception age children have not increased over the past year. Obesity levels at Year 6, however, have increased slightly and reducing this continues to be a priority in the Children and Young People's Plan. Participation by children and young people in high quality sport is also a priority but take-up is lower than in similar areas and that found nationally. Wirral provides a good range of services to support children and young people with emotional or mental health difficulties is promoted actively in schools. Breast-feeding rates remain low in comparison to the national average but the number of young women under the age of 18 who become pregnant is falling steadily.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are good in most settings although adoption services do less well. Wirral is committed to ensuring children are safe at home, in the community and in schools, and this is a key priority in its Children and Young People's Plan. Partners working together have already had some success: for example, road traffic accidents that kill or seriously injure children have reduced, as have hospital admissions caused by unintentional and deliberate injuries. The local authority reports that good information and procedures are in place to respond to the needs of children missing from home and the recent inspection of front-line child protection services found that children at risk of harm are promptly identified and appropriately supported. Local children in need data show that good improvements have been made in reducing the number of child protection plans lasting for two years or longer and in ensuring looked after children have stable, long-term placements.

Most settings are good at helping children and young people to do well and enjoy their learning but childcare provision is less so. Nearly all national measures show steady year-on-year improvement for the majority of children and young people. The local authority is good at helping the weakest schools improve and this is confirmed by recent monitoring reports to the five primary schools judged to be inadequate. Standards continue to rise in all stages of education, including early years and primary schools and, by the age of 16, more than half of young people gain five or more good GCSEs. One of the biggest challenges for the authority is how to continue to reduce the gap in achievement between the majority of its 16-year-old pupils and those who are from low-income families. Most secondary schools have good or outstanding standards of behaviour and frequent absence rates are low and reducing at a faster rate than elsewhere.

Wirral has a number of successful arrangements for involving children and young people in planning and reviewing local services. Children and young people from a range of backgrounds have contributed to discussions with the local authority on a variety of issues, such as transport as a barrier to getting involved in organised activities, and they have taken part in planning area-based youth 'hubs' and play spaces. An inspection in 2009 found re-offending rates by young people in the Wirral to be comparable with similar areas, and the youth offending service to be working reasonably well. Most young people who offend receive good support to find appropriate work or training. More young people report that they use alcohol or illegal substances more frequently than in similar areas and the local authority's commitment to reduce risk-taking behaviour is a key priority.

As they get older, young people get good support from the large majority of settings to do well as they move in to adult life. Effective partnership working between the local authority, colleges, and local businesses is a key strength and has provided increased choices for young people as they leave school. The numbers of young people who are not in education, work or training have reduced slowly and over time. The Wirral Apprentice scheme has recently placed 167 young people into suitable jobs, including a high percentage that had previously been without work or an education placement. The take-up of formal childcare by low-income families has increased year on year. Fewer young people from this group achieve higher qualifications by the time they reach age 19 although more are now achieving good GCSEs or equivalent. The numbers of care leavers in education, work or training are lower than the national average but most are helped to find suitable accommodation.

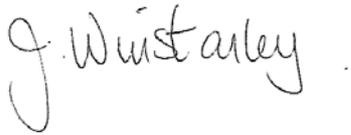
Prospects for improvement

Most outcomes for children and young people living in the Wirral are good and progress has been sustained and in some instances improved upon since last year. The local authority's review of its Children and Young People's Plan shows clearly where further progress is required and its priorities are well chosen. Initiatives to reduce child poverty are given high priority in plans, with a focus on employment. An Ofsted survey of 14–19 developments in Wirral judged strategic leadership and management to be strong. The recent inspection of front-line child protection services found many strengths including good performance management and effective multi-agency work to support families with greatest need. In response to weaknesses in the local adoption service and inadequate private fostering arrangements identified by inspection the local authority made arrangements to review practice and procedures. Too much early years and childcare provision are only satisfactory. However, Ofsted's monitoring visits to weaker schools show that

the local authority is doing good work to help them get better. Reducing the gap in achievement between the majority of young people and those from low-income families is a serious challenge which has been prioritised by the local authority.

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