

9 December 2010

Mrs Sue Imbriano
Director of Children's Services
Buckinghamshire County Council
Room 20E, County Hall
Walton Street, Aylesbury
Buckinghamshire HP20 1UZ

Dear Mrs Imbriano

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.

Buckinghamshire County Council children's services assessment 2010

Children's services assessment	Performs excellently (4)
---------------------------------------	---------------------------------

Children's services in Buckinghamshire County Council perform excellently. This shows improvement from 2009, when services performed well.

The very large majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or outstanding and very few are inadequate. This shows good improvement from a previous strong performance. Almost all do very well at supporting learning and achievement and the large majority do very well at keeping children and young people safe. For young children, childminders and childcare are good overall as are nurseries and early years education in primary schools. Primary schools are also mostly good but three are inadequate. Of these, two are not making enough progress despite at least satisfactory support from the local authority. Secondary schools are mainly good. Provision for learning after the age of 16 remains a relative weakness. Although the majority of school sixth forms are good or outstanding, just under half are only satisfactory and so performance is below that found elsewhere. One further education college is good but the other is satisfactory. Pupil referral units are good or outstanding and most special schools are now of this very high quality. For children in care, the large majority of children's homes are good and fostering and adoption agencies are good or outstanding.

An unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found significant strengths and no areas in need of urgent action. Private fostering arrangements are satisfactory.

National measures of performance show the very large majority of outcomes at least in line with those for similar areas or nationally, including all measures of educational attainment and progress. Standards that are above average for five and 11-year-olds and well above average at the age of 16 continue to rise, but there remains wide variation between schools. By the age of 19, young people are increasingly better qualified than in similar areas. Attainment gaps for key vulnerable groups are mostly bigger than similar areas and nationally. Most are closing well and some more quickly than comparators but the gap for 16-year-olds with special educational needs has increased.

Key areas for further development

- Improve secondary school sixth forms so that more are good or better.
- Close attainment gaps further, particularly for 16-year-olds with special educational needs.

Outcomes for children and young people

Local arrangements to encourage children and young people to live healthy lives show considerable success. All inspected services and settings are good or outstanding in this area. Improvements include a full range of services now in place for children and young people with emotional or mental health difficulties, higher numbers of mothers who breast-feed, more children taking part in sport regularly and greater satisfaction with parks and play areas. Few young women under the age of 18 become pregnant although numbers have increased in the last few years. More teenagers who are mothers are now in education, training or work.

Effective action is taken to keep children and young people safe. Within the community, fewer children are killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents and a recent survey found far fewer now being bullied. In front-line child protection services, a recent inspection reported that agencies are clear about when to refer children to social services. Almost all referrals to children's social care are assessed by a social worker. An average number of initial assessments but fewer full assessments, although of very good quality, are now carried out on time. Some plans to protect children and young people from harm last for longer than they should, and more children now need another plan because problems remain. Almost all meetings to review these plans are carried out on time. Families are found quickly for children who need to be adopted. The number of times children in care change placements are about the same as elsewhere, as is the length of time they stay in the same place. Most meetings to review their plans are held on time.

Services and settings are highly successful in helping children and young people to learn and achieve, although fewer assessments of special educational needs are completed on time than nationally. Improvements include a significant rise in the achievement of five-year-olds and even more 16-year-olds gaining higher grade examination results. In secondary schools, more have behaviour that is at least good, poor attendance has reduced and only one, instead of three, does not meet the minimum standards for pupil performance. However, far fewer young people take up learning diplomas than elsewhere. Not all primary schools have shown the same good improvement and targets for 11-year-olds were missed.

Services and settings, working successfully with partners, are highly effective in supporting children and young people to make a positive contribution to their communities. Although average numbers of young people take part in organised activities in their area, fewer now say they have recently been drunk or taken drugs. The youth offending service is doing particularly well. Fewer young people break the law for the first time and re-offending has reduced significantly, as have numbers sentenced to custody. More young people who offend are in education, training or work and more have a suitable place to live.

Services and settings give strong support to young people to achieve economic well-being. The number of young people not in education, training or work remains in line with similar areas. Achievement of qualifications by the age of 19 has improved further. For qualifications at the higher level, the gap in achievement for those from

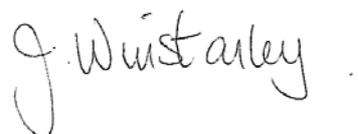
low-income families has closed much faster than in similar areas and nationally. Partners know there are gaps in the skills needed for employment and a strategy with local businesses is now in place. Most care leavers are now in work or learning and in suitable accommodation.

Prospects for improvement

A significant number of outcomes are improving and services and settings support children and young people very well. The local authority is clear about areas for improvement and has good plans in place. It sets about these with determination and acts quickly, for example in its work with parents to prevent family breakdown. The Children and Young People's Plan is very comprehensive in its review and identifies the right priorities and actions, such as closing attainment gaps and reducing wide variation in the performance of schools. Partnerships are strong and well established, data sharing is a strength and joint funding of activities are successful in, for example, reducing waiting times for services for children and young people with emotional or mental health difficulties. Getting good value from services is a key priority. For young people who offend, services are strongly led and show good capacity to sustain and improve an already notable performance. In children's social care services, staff are supervised very well and agencies exchange information very well. Children and family members are involved in plans that help them but these take too much time to complete, with the risk that some children could be left without the service they need. It was of recent concern to the Information Commissioner that some personal information on children whose circumstances have made them vulnerable was lost in a public place. The local authority has pledged to improve its procedures.

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