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Mr Gerald Meehan
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Dear Mr Meehan

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.

Halton Borough Council children's services assessment

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

The large majority of services, settings and institutions inspected by Ofsted are good or better. Nursery and primary schools are nearly all good or better and only one primary school is inadequate. The further education college is now good; an improvement since last year. However, there is still satisfactory provision in some secondary schools, one pupil referral unit and the secondary sixth form school. One satisfactory secondary school has now closed and a second has become an Academy. The majority of childcare is good or better. The local fostering and adoption agencies and the three local authority children's homes are good, as is the large majority which are managed by the private and voluntary sector. Those private children's homes used by the local authority are good or outstanding. The large majority of services and settings are good or better at helping children and young people stay safe and achieve well in their education.

An unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found much that was strong and no areas for priority action. The joint area review in 2008 found safeguarding to be outstanding and looked after children services to be good.

National performance measures show that the large majority of outcomes are in line with or above the average for England or for similar areas, as are the educational attainment and progress indicators. Young children starting out at school make broadly average progress and do as well as their peers elsewhere. Results in national tests for 11-year-olds are slightly above the regional average and continue to improve year on year. The gap in achievement between all pupils and those from low-income families is reducing at the Early Year's Foundation Stage and at Year 6 and this is better than in similar areas. The unvalidated results for 16-year-olds in 2010 which dipped in 2009, have improved well to a rate just above the 2008 figure. The gap in achievement between those pupils coming from low-income families and the rest continues to reduce and is better than similar areas. Young people with special educational needs do marginally less well than their peers in similar areas. Fewer 19-year-olds gain good GCSEs or equivalent qualifications than in similar areas, although most recent unvalidated data for 2010 results show good improvement. Local data also show numbers gaining higher level qualifications have increased in 2010. Those young people from low-income families do better than their peers elsewhere.

Key areas for further development

- Improve the quality of those secondary schools which are satisfactory.
- Improve further the numbers of 16- to 19-year-olds gaining good GCSE and higher level qualifications.

Outcomes for children and young people

Children and young people receive good support in most settings to be healthy and to live healthy lives. The local authority is committed to improving child and adolescent mental health services. For example, the increased use of counselling services by children and young people and help through the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) scheme in schools are supporting improvements in emotional health and well-being outcomes. More children and young people report that they have good relationships with their family and friendship groups than in similar areas. Work with key partners has helped to reduce the high number of young women under the age of 18 who become pregnant and 2009–2010 public health data show a reduction in obesity levels amongst children in their Reception Year and in Year 6. The numbers of mothers breast-feeding their babies have increased since last year, although Halton still performs significantly below the national average.

Arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are good in the large majority of settings, although inspections have found that some child care settings do less well. The local authority works well with its partners to help children to feel safe in their homes, at schools and in their local communities. This is a key priority in the Children and Young People's Plan and a number of projects have been set up to increase support to groups whose circumstances have made vulnerable, such as young carers, children missing from home and children living in care. Numbers of children who are killed or seriously injured on the roads are much lower than three years ago and admissions to hospital caused by unintentional or deliberate injury have reduced since 2007. Nevertheless, these rates are still higher than elsewhere. The unannounced inspection of front-line child protection services found much that was strong and no areas for priority action. There is high morale amongst the staff and examples of excellent management practice to support social workers. The learning achieved from good quality assurance auditing led by the Halton Safeguarding Children's Board is leading to improved practice. Local Children in Need data show most measures to have sustained good performance since last year with some improvement, particularly in completion of core assessments.

Almost all services and settings are good at helping children and young people do well and enjoy their learning. Most children make adequate progress when they first start school and by the time they reach the end of primary school, 11-year-olds make good progress and achieve as well as their peers in similar areas. In nursery and primary schools, children from low-income backgrounds do very well in

comparison to their peers. Action has been taken by the local authority to address the weaker secondary schools. One satisfactory school has now closed and a second, where standards have improved significantly in the last year, has become an Academy. Examination results for 16-year-olds improved markedly in 2008, bringing achievement to a level much better than in similar areas, although results dipped last year to below the regional average. Unvalidated examination results for 2010 show improvement again to slightly above the 2008 figures and in line with the regional average. Those pupils with special educational needs at this age do less well than their peers in similar areas and the rate of improvement has been slower. Good strategies have been developed with schools and providers to help them improve, including additional one-to-one support and personalised action plans. Standards of behaviour are judged to be good or better in the large majority of schools and the numbers of young people frequently absent continue to fall as do permanent exclusions.

The involvement of children and young people in decision making is very good in most settings. Successful arrangements for involving them in planning and reviewing local services have been in place for a long time; many interesting and creative opportunities have been set up, often by young people themselves, to make sure no groups are left out. In an inspection in 2009, re-offending by young people was found to be comparable with similar areas and the youth offending service was judged to be performing well in many key areas, not least in managing the risk of harm to others and in developing strong and effective partnerships which were of benefit to children and young people.

The economic downturn is beginning to have an impact on jobs in Halton and more people are now out of work. However, good progress has been made in spite of this and there has been a considerable reduction in the numbers of young people not in work, education or training since 2009. Plans have been reviewed and prioritised, backed by good partnership arrangements between local businesses, the further education college and the local authority. The proportion of 17-year-olds in education or training remains lower than in other areas, but this conceals progress made over time and the local target has been exceeded. The local authority knows that not all young people do as well as they can by the age of 19. Those from low-income families are catching up quickly and more from this group are going on to higher education. Take up of funding for childcare by low-income families is also good.

Prospects for improvement

Many outcomes for children and young people are good and improving in Halton. The local authority's review of its Children and Young People's Plan shows a clear understanding of what needs to be done to achieve better progress in key areas, such as reducing the numbers of young people not in education or training and levels of obesity in some primary school children. Realistic targets have been set and these are regularly reviewed by the local authority and its partners. Resources have been focused to those areas that need the most rapid improvement, for example in supporting the schools that need the most help and in making sure those children whose circumstances have made them most vulnerable also get the support they

need. The local authority is aware of the challenges facing some of its schools and has re-organised provision in order to raise standards. It is too soon to judge whether these actions will be successful but following an improvement in standards in 2009–2010 the signs are promising. Work has been prioritised to improve the numbers of young people in education, work or training and recent local figures show numbers to be reducing steadily, while levels of achievement for 16- to 19-year-olds have also improved. The recent inspection of front-line child protection services found good leadership and examples of excellent management practice. Good performance in children's social care has been sustained.

This children's services assessment is provided in accordance with section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Yours sincerely

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager, Children's Services Assessment

Pre-publication