

Appendix 2

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Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families Tim Loughton
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
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5 April 2011

Dear Minister

Since I last wrote to you in December, the Leeds Children's Services Improvement Board has met three times.

At each meeting we have received performance monitoring reports and we have also looked in depth at progress and the current position on Safeguarding and on young people participating fully, socially and economically – including an in depth look at school learning outcomes and the issues shaping the future of learning provision in the city.

I have also attended the Local Authority's Leader's Management Team and the Children's Scrutiny Board to appraise members of progress.

Overall Progress

The Board has spent some time taking stock of the current position and progress on items within the performance monitoring report. This was a good session and resulted in almost 20 strands of work being closed down as all actions were complete. A number of strands are now at the stage where they can be passed to another accountable body for continuous monitoring, for example, the Children's Trust Board, and a number have stayed with the Improvement Board for continued scrutiny and monitoring.

I flagged up in my last report that the Local Authority was expecting its annual assessment letter from Ofsted and that this would label them as '*performs poorly*'. This was, as expected, published in December. However, Ofsted undertook an unannounced inspection in January of this year which was much more positive.

The inspection letter, which was published in February, showed that the Local Authority had made great progress and did not highlight any priority areas for action. Although the Local Authority cannot become, and is not, complacent following this inspection, it does highlight the progress made and commitment of the Local Authority to continue to improve services for children in Leeds.

Specific Areas of Work

Transformation Programme

The Director of Children's Services is continuing to refine his directorate structure and it is planned to have the majority of new arrangements in place by the end of September. This takes into account the integration of Education Leeds into the Local Authority.

You will recall from my last report that this transition work was underway and, in your response, you highlighted that this was an important process to get right.

The Local Authority has seconded an experienced head teacher, Simon Flowers, into the role of Strategic Leader for Education Integration and he is leading on the work around the development of the new relationship with schools. Consultation has taken place with schools to develop an enhanced prospectus of services to be offered from April.

The Director of Children's Services and Executive Lead Member of the Local Authority have also commissioned a short external review of education in the city to enable them to take stock of the current position and performance and to inform the ongoing improvement journey for learning in the city.

Data

As you highlighted in your response to my last report, the issues around the quality of case recording and data collection need to be a focus of the Board's work going forward. I can assure you that work continues on this area.

The policy to replace the existing computer systems for Children's Social Care has been agreed in principle and the business case was approved by the Local Authority's Executive Board in January. Work on the new system is underway with a programme board established. This is a complex project, however, the Local Authority is committed to ensuring these improvements are made.

Consistency of Practice

One of the areas that the Improvement Board is focusing on is ensuring that there is consistency of practice across the children's services directorate. There are clearly pockets of excellence within the directorate but the Improvement Board has emphasised that it wants to see evidence that this is becoming consistent across the service.

Children and Young People at risk of being left out

It is clear from the work we have been focusing on that there is a risk to children and young people where there are gaps in attainment or where children are in Local Authority care.

Through the Children's Trust Board, the Local Authority and its partners are in the final stages of developing a new children and young people's plan (CYPP). This sets out a very clear ambition for Leeds to be a child friendly city, using the Unicef framework for action and building blocks to inform its approach. The CYPP sets out five clear outcomes that the organisation is focusing on. They are ensuring that children and young people:

- are safe from harm;
- do well in learning and have the skills for life;
- choose healthy lifestyles;
- have fun growing up; and

- are active citizens who feel they have voice and influence.

There are 11 priorities to focus on to deliver against these outcomes, based on the assessment of need and with indicators attached to them. The Children's Trust Board has selected three of those 11 as 'obsessions', where the partnership as a whole will make even more collective effort to improve performance. These obsessions are: changing referral patterns to social care to help safely reduce the number of looked after children; improving school attendance in both primary and secondary; and reducing the number of those who are not in employment, education or training. To complement the focus of these obsessions the Children's Trust Board has also endorsed some different approaches to develop the city's workforce to provide some of the 'glue' that will enable people to work together better: firstly, 'outcomes based accountability', which has proven results to focus the collective effort on improving outcomes and sharpening accountability; and 'restorative practice', as a way of working with children and families and within the workforce as a group of professionals and, as a very strong way of supporting and challenging each other to help change behaviour.

The inspection report highlights that the areas of priority action identified at the previous inspection of these services in July 2009 have been addressed and that the areas of development identified at the previous inspection have been mostly met '*with firm arrangements in place to deliver on the remaining issues*'.

It also states that considerable progress has been made and describes strong leadership which has resulted in a '*remarkable and impressive improvement in the quality of the services inspected and the safety of children in the city*'.

The report does highlight several areas for development, all of which are already being monitored as part of the Improvement Board's work. These include work on the electronic social care record system and the quality of recording.

Financial Backdrop

The Local Authority continues to strive to deliver improvement to children's services despite the financial challenges it faces for 2011/12.

Additional funding has been found to maintain and, in some instances, deliver improvements in key priorities. These include £11.2 million in children's services to meet the acute service demand pressures, including resources of £1.6 million for social care fieldwork and £1.3 million for safeguarding. There are big changes to schools' budgets which will place extra pressure on the children's services directorate at a time of major change. The Local Authority has taken account of the restructuring and reshaping that is taking place when considering its budgets.

The Local Authority needs to ensure that pressures on its other services do not affect the positive work that is being done in children's services. Partner agencies also have immense pressure on their budgets for 2011/12 and it is vital, therefore, that all agencies look for alignment of services to ensure they make the most of the funds available rather than running the risk of financial pressures fracturing the key partnership relations. This is still a fragile situation and one that the Improvement Board will be keeping track on.

Conclusion

I believe that the Improvement Board is seeing good progress for children's services in Leeds, borne out by the results of the latest Ofsted inspection.

The Local Authority, however, is not complacent and knows that there is a lot of work still to do and is committed to ensuring that the children of Leeds receive the best services possible.

We should not perpetuate the life of the Improvement Board beyond its usefulness and I propose that we review the situation in July. The Improvement Board will have been in place for 18 months at this time. However, Leeds recognises that the Improvement Board has been of significant value and is keen to consider how it can take that sort of external challenge and support model forward in order to achieve its ambitions to reach excellence. From my point of view, and through the experience of chairing the Improvement Board, I would be keen to ensure that the Department for Education is able to support this approach.

I look forward to writing to you again once we have reviewed the work of the Improvement Board in July and I will update you then on our recommendations of the best way to take this work forward.

Yours sincerely

Bill McCarthy
Chief Executive – NHS Yorkshire and the Humber
Independent Chair for Leeds Children's Services Improvement Board



Tim Loughton MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families

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12 May 2011

Dear Mr McCarthy,

Thank you for your latest report as chair of Leeds' Children's Services Improvement Board. I was very encouraged to read that the momentum of good progress is being maintained, and I note the positive findings from the unannounced inspection by Ofsted and the inspection of fostering and adoption services, including the substantial contribution being made by those leading the change. This is good news (though there are still several areas requiring further improvement) and should both be gratifying to all those involved and provide a spur for the further improvement needed.

I was also pleased to note from your report that good progress is being made on the transition programme to integrate Education Leeds back into Council control and I note the recent appointment of Simon Flowers to integrate educational issues into the work of the Improvement Board. I would like to see more detail about the rate of progress in your next report.

Consistency of social work practice clearly remains an issue for the Board to address. I also raised some concerns following your previous report on the quality of case recording and data collection. I know the Improvement Board has its sights on these issues and I look forward to see early evidence of improvement.

Department officials are due to visit you and Council officials in May to carry out a third interim review of progress. I therefore look forward to further evidence of progress before the summer, from that discussion and from your next report in July.

I am copying this letter to the Lead Member, Councillor Judith Blake, Chief Executive, Tom Riordan and DCS Nigel Richardson.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Loughton'.

TIM LOUGHTON MP

Department for
Education