

DfE Review Meeting with Leeds City Council – 20 May 2011

Attending: Nigel Richardson (Leeds CC), Mariana Pexton (Leeds CC), Jackie Wilson (Leeds CC), Simon Flowers (Leeds CC), Sarah Sinclair (Leeds CC), Councillor Blake (Leeds CC), Bill McCarthy (Independent IB Chair), Penny Thompson (external challenge and support), Graham Archer (DfE), John Hudson (DfE), Nicola Whomersley (DfE).

Dear Nigel,

It was good to meet you and colleagues at the Review meeting on the 20 May and I would like to thank everyone for attending and for their contribution. Progress since my visit last July was palpable. The presentations made that clear and the atmosphere was very different, with a clear sense of strong leadership from officers and from Councillor Blake, realism about what was still needed and plans for achieving it. I was left much more confident about the extent and sustainability of progress. Here's my sense of the detail of the discussion – very happy to discuss any of it with you.

- The substantive part of the meeting was spent reviewing and probing your assessment of progress. Positive changes in service delivery and effectiveness has been reflected in recent positive inspections of service practice (fostering, adoption and youth service) and particularly the good unannounced Ofsted inspection of contact, referral and assessment, published in February.
- There is strong leadership and commitment from the Children's Trust Board which will continue in Leeds as the key strategic driver for ensuring continued improvement and sustainability in the long term.
- Through the governance of the Children's Trust Board, a new children and young people's plan (CYPP) has been developed with city wide partnership buy in. This sets out five clear outcomes, underpinned by 11 priorities of which three are 'obsessions', (changing referral patterns by reducing the number of looked after children; improving school attendance; and economic re-generation by reducing the number of young people who are NEET).
- There is a change in culture, in particular partners and practitioners across the city are starting to converse in a common language and there is recognition this is a "city wide" agenda and not just Council led. Approach and understanding is more collaborative from partners, with a keen appetite for shared learning and a willingness to join up strategies and to limit costs.
- On early invention, recognition across partnerships of shared ownership and the need to invest early to reduce costs later. There are still challenges around turning this into fully integrated practise at local level.
- You outlined the additional investment secured across the Council despite the funding pressures the Council faces. Although the current financial investment is unlikely to be sustainable in the long term, you felt confident that the investment to improve would be there until the service was operating at an adequate level or better. This is encouraging and demonstrates to me the level of political commitment and the importance the Council places on the need to continue to improve.

- On numerical targets in the Improvement Notice there has been clear progress in timeliness of both initial and core assessments - with most targets exceeded. The communications and training work you have undertaken on thresholds is showing rewards, which are more appropriately targeted and better understood by partners and agencies. These achievements have been made in the context of a rise in volume of referrals. Also recognition of a 100% rise in child protection plans, compared to last year and a decrease in the numbers of children with second and subsequent plans. Embedding and maintaining this level of delivery and at consistently good quality remains the ongoing challenge.
- Considerable progress has been made on building the capacity and capability of the workforce with a view to embedding new structures by September 2011. We noted your intention to recruit 56 advanced practitioners but thought this ambitious within the timescale forecast.
- Challenges ahead were identified as future governance on health and you identified three overarching priorities: looked after children, school attendance and destinations, which the Council and partners will focus on to underpin the wider city vision and future ambition for Leeds to be a child friendly city.
- Summing up on the progress made to date, Councillor Blake reflected on the improvement journey from a difficult time when the council was particularly inward facing and defensive, to one which is beginning to grow in confidence. Morale is higher and there are now more open and honest conversations with staff and with partners and a determination to improve services to children, young people and families in Leeds to a level they deserve.
- We had a discussion on schools and education, particularly now that the responsibility for education in Leeds is being integrated back into Council control. There seems to be a positive story emerging but clearly still lots of work to do to build the new relationship with schools and to improve outcomes, particularly with your underperforming schools. I recognise that conversations are already taking place with your schools and academies on your core offer and to ensure there is a coherent understanding and commitment by all schools to the change programme. My slight concern is on the pace of this and whether there will be a period of turbulence until new structures are embedded.

In summary, we recognise that progress has been made. However against a backdrop of very strong safeguarding progress, the challenge, inevitably perhaps for somewhere the size of Leeds is ensuring consistently strong practice everywhere. On the education side, we agreed there was more to be done, as you integrate services back into the Council, but a clear sense of the task.

We agreed to consider exit from intervention in the light of the Ofsted inspection you have requested. If that inspection reflects, on the ground, the progress we have seen at the leadership level, there would be a good case for us to put to Ministers.

Yours sincerely

GRAHAM ARCHER

Deputy Director: Local Improvement and Intervention Division