

Peter Hay  
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Dear Peter

### **CHILDREN'S SERVICES PEER REVIEW**

Thank you for commissioning the recent Children's Services Peer Review. The team very much appreciated the welcome that we received and the way in which everybody that we met engaged in the process. People's openness and honesty helped enormously with our identification of the issues and has hopefully helped to provide a set of findings that will stand Children's Services and the children's partnership in good stead as things are taken forward. We were very well supported both during the time on-site and in the lead up to the review.

We agreed to send you a letter confirming our findings and these are outlined below. Members of the peer review team would be very willing to contribute to the council and partner organisations further drawing out the learning and understanding from the review in whatever areas or ways that you feel would be most appropriate. The LGA is happy to facilitate this process.

The review focused on the following key questions, as part of a 'joint endeavour' with the council and others involved in the children's services agenda in Birmingham:

- Is the vision for children, young people and families in Birmingham, and Children's Services, right?
- Do the plans and strategy support the vision?
- Is there evidence of improved managerial grip?
- Are the performance management arrangements necessary to support improvement in place?
- Is there a proactive culture or does the culture act as a barrier?

- Is there the capacity and capability necessary to deliver improvement?

This letter sets out the findings we derived from exploring these questions with those people that we met. It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. A team of peers used their experience to reflect on the information the council and partners presented and assimilate it in to the themes outlined below.

## **Executive Summary**

There is a strong political vision for the city of Birmingham which is widely understood and supported. What is less clear are the hopes for, and the future role of, children and young people in the city and we therefore see a need for the vision to be underpinned by a clear outlining of the way in which Birmingham children and young people are integral to the future of the city.

There is an emerging strategy for improving outcomes for children and young people. However, there is a need to move swiftly to underpin the agreed strategy with action plans and clear lines of accountability across the partnership and at every level in the council.

The Leader and Lead Member provide effective support and challenge around the children's agenda. The improvement agenda for Children's Services has been central to the discussions and considerations around the budget over recent months and the Strategic Director of People and the emerging strategy are being backed by the political leadership. The Strategic Director has started well and is widely respected and liked. It is important that he is strongly supported at a corporate level. He is bringing a new, open and engaging style. The team that supports him needs to be of the highest quality and to demonstrate a strong sense of cohesion, urgency, responsibility and leadership.

The key focus for Birmingham's Children's Services must be on ensuring effective safeguarding practice, improved outcomes for children and the stabilisation of the workforce. There is evidence of improved managerial grip and a greater focus on effective operational delivery but this is extremely variable and needs to progress much further. Performance management systems and infrastructure are not currently capable of underpinning improvement. A concerted effort is now being made to address these inadequacies.

There are examples of good practice across the children's partnership in the city. It is important that the time is taken to highlight and communicate what is working well and successes that are achieved. There is also a need to recognise areas of strength and expertise across the council and partnership in order to see if they can be replicated and utilised within the children's partnership.

The arrangements for partnership working are central to improvement. We found clear evidence of re-building trust and confidence amongst partners, which had undoubtedly diminished in some quarters in recent years. Thus there are signs of promise but these positive first steps need to translate into substantive progress and delivery.

Birmingham has the potential to improve and run a good, or even better, level of Children's Services. There is a sense that the council and partners have lost some of their self-belief in this regard. Correspondingly, however, we do not accept that the culture, scale, diversity or any other aspect of the city can legitimately be used as an excuse for failure or diminished ambition.

There is a tendency in the council and among partners to 'blame the social worker' for the evident problems in Children's Services. This culture needs to be reframed. The leadership and management within Children's Services need to win 'hearts and minds'. The organisational culture needs to be forward looking and to foster ownership, accountability and compliance. Tackling the host of secondary impediments that act as a barrier to the effective working of staff would represent a very positive start.

There has been a promising start in relation to 'early help' but the offer lacks overall coherence and strong multi-agency buy-in. It requires sustained momentum by all partners, leading to the approach becoming deeply embedded across all agencies.

There are positive signs appearing generally around Children's Services and the children's partnership and some good news stories are emerging – but these are early days. The position remains fragile. There are also significant risks being faced going forward which the council will need to be very mindful of and handle with care.

In addition to these overall findings, there are two urgent issues that require immediate action. These relate to the entry point into, and unallocated cases within, children's social care.

### **For Immediate Action**

The Review Team highlighted two urgent issues when presenting their overall findings:

- There are serious concerns in the council and Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) about the 'front door', or entry point, into children's social care. This poses an immediate risk to the safety of children and young people in Birmingham and warrants urgent action. Some action is already in hand, and was prior to the peer review, but it is clear that outstanding concerns need to be addressed immediately. A solution that is collectively owned by the senior management team within Children's Services needs to be implemented within a matter of days and not subsequently un-picked or diluted in any way.
- Views have been expressed that there are a number of unallocated cases across children's social care. It is symptomatic of the performance and workflow management issues in Children's Services, which we touch on later in this letter, but we are clear this is not simply a recording or data anomaly. It therefore requires the authority to immediately clarify the situation through whatever means are available to it and, if a problem is found to exist, moves must be made to address it.

## **Other Key Findings**

The key findings presented to you were covered under the following headings:

- Vision
- Performance
- Leadership
- Change Management
- Communications
- Workforce

### **Vision**

There is a strong political vision for, and commitment to, the city of Birmingham which is widely understood and supported. People we spoke to are aware of the aspirations for the future that have been outlined by the Leader and are aligning with them. What people we spoke to found less clear, however, are the hopes for, and the future role of, children and young people in the city. We therefore see a need for the existing overall vision to be underpinned by a clear outlining of the way in which Birmingham children and young people are integral to the future of the city. This in turn will provide an opportunity to develop an ambition and statement of intent from the children's partnership in the city regarding children and young people, including clear simple messages about the 'core offer' to them and their families and the future shape of the services that will make up that offer.

It is acknowledged within the senior leadership of Children's Services that the 'voice' of children, young people and families is currently not sufficiently prevalent. Their input needs to be drawn upon much more in informing future policy and practice – doing so is critical to the sustainability of any improvement because it will lead to approaches that reflect people's needs.

There is an emerging strategy for improving outcomes for children and young people which is considered, sequenced and focussed but needs to plan for the medium and not just the short term. The council is fully aware of this and work on the strategy was on-going around the time of the peer review, with a view to reporting on it to Cabinet in mid-December. The authority is fully committed to taking account of the findings from the peer review when developing the strategy further. There is a need to move swiftly to underpin the agreed strategy with action plans and clear lines of accountability across the partnership, and at every level in the council, that provide clarity regarding what needs to be done, by whom and by when.

The key focus for Birmingham's Children's Services must be on ensuring effective safeguarding practice, improved outcomes for children and the stabilisation of the workforce. There is clearly a lot of speculation and discussion regarding what the right model and approach is in Birmingham into the future. The council is right to consider alternative models for the delivery of children's social care in Birmingham and, in so doing, ensure that these criteria are duly weighted to reflect what is most important.

## **Performance**

There is evidence of improved managerial grip and a greater focus on effective operational delivery within Children's Services – but this is extremely variable and needs to progress much further. Contributory factors to the improvement include recruitment to a number of senior and middle manager level posts in the directorate and the greater degree of rigour that the new Strategic Director of People has brought to performance management and the holding to account of people.

There are examples of good practice across the children's partnership in the city, including aspects of children's social care. Given the scrutiny that children's services in Birmingham are under, not least from Government and the national media, and the impact this has on reputation and morale, it is important that the time is taken by senior leaders to highlight and communicate what is working well and successes that are achieved. There is also a need to recognise areas of strength and expertise across the council and partnership, in whatever sphere they may be being achieved, in order to see if they can be replicated and utilised within the children's partnership. An example would be the effective approach to project management that has been established within Adult Services in the council. Such sharing of good practice will be helpful in enabling Children's Services and partners to establish means of improvement in the most efficient and effective way.

Performance management systems and infrastructure within Children's Services are not currently capable of underpinning improvement. Data is too frequently untimely and unreliable – as evidenced by the difficulties in determining whether there are unallocated cases in children's social care. Similarly, the timeliness with which assessments are undertaken, the frequency and quality of supervision and sickness absence levels are also unclear. A concerted effort is now being made to address these inadequacies as it is fundamental to securing quality practice and achieving compliance.

Practice improvement should be more evidence-led, including drawing upon research and best practice elsewhere. The council and partners could look more regularly beyond Birmingham at what others are doing and adopt appropriate best practice and apply learning - with this being likely to help further progress be made more quickly.

Quality assurance is being developed but is not sufficiently inclusive of those affected: the principle of being 'done with' rather than 'done to' frontline practitioners is crucial to both accuracy and morale. It is strongly felt that the 'done to' approach has dominated

within Children's Services, leaving people feeling criticised and unsupported rather than assisted in delivering improvement and in their personal development.

The performance of partners is variable, as is the quality of relationships with the council. We recognise the analysis contained in the recent INLOGOV report into partnership arrangements around the children's agenda and see no benefit in replicating those messages here. We endorse the need for urgent action to act on these findings. The arrangements for partnership working, including schools and Adult Services, are central to improvement. We found clear evidence of re-building trust and confidence amongst partners, which had undoubtedly diminished in some quarters in recent years. Thus there are signs of promise in this regard, much of which is down to the Strategic Director of People and the more open and engaging approach that he demonstrates and is seeking to instil in Children's Services. However, these positive first steps need to translate into substantive progress and delivery.

The management of child sexual exploitation (CSE) related issues has been identified as a key strategic aim and Children's Services have taken a lead in developing a comprehensive CSE strategy. The establishment of a multi-agency CSE Team, whilst in its early stages, looks to be an area of good and effective practice and this area of work overall reflects good regional collaboration.

A 'gap' is appearing between the emerging new strategy for improving outcomes for children and young people and the plans and initiatives that were established previously. This is almost inevitable given the scale and duration of the improvement agenda that has existed around the children's partnership in the city, the range of initiatives that have been adopted and the changes in leadership that have taken place. A review of all plans should be undertaken to demonstrate continuity and coherence – enabling people to be clear about what remains valid, what no longer applies and how they can focus their efforts accordingly.

There are positive signs appearing generally around Children's Services and the children's partnership and some good news stories are emerging – but these are early days. The position remains fragile. There are also significant risks being faced going forward which the council will need to be very mindful of and handle with care. These include the recently launched reviews regarding the council's future relationship with schools and the provision in the city of early years support, family centres and children's centres. The change in corporate leadership in the council, in terms of structural change and the recruitment of a new Chief Executive, marks a key juncture in the city's journey and obviously the resourcing pressures that are being faced, and the related consideration of priorities and budget changes, carry major risks. Also, with such a heavy emphasis being placed upon the improvement of safeguarding, there is a risk that the necessary focus on children in care and care leavers becomes dissipated.

## **Leadership**

Birmingham has the potential to improve and run a good, or even better, level of Children's Services. There is a sense that the council and partners have lost some of

their self-belief in this regard. Correspondingly, however, we do not accept that the culture, scale, diversity or any other aspect of the city can legitimately be used as an excuse for failure or diminished ambition.

The Leader and Lead Member provide effective support and challenge around the children's agenda at an Executive level. The improvement agenda for Children's Services has been central to the discussions and considerations around the budget over recent months and the Strategic Director of People and the emerging strategy for improving outcomes for children and young people are being backed by the political leadership.

Scrutiny of Children's Services and Corporate Parenting are strengthening. However, the level of elected member engagement remains too limited. The future success of Children's Services needs to be recognised as a corporate priority across the elected membership of the council – and fundamental to the reputation of the authority – which has been, and continues to be, badly damaged by safeguarding issues.

It is important that the Strategic Director of People is strongly supported at a corporate level. A team effort within the council is required. There are opportunities in the re-shaping of corporate structures and through the appointment of a new Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive to build better synergy and consistency across the council in order to improve outcomes for children, young people and families. We learnt of ways in which the corporate centre of the council has worked recently to support improvement in Children's Services and there is a growing track record of effectively working together. However, there is still a considerable way to go. The forthcoming changes provide an opportunity to re-cast approaches.

The new Strategic Director of People has started well and is widely respected and liked. He has a strong track record of delivering improvement and has clear credibility as a result of his leadership of Adult Services in Birmingham. He is bringing a new, open and engaging style, which he is seeking to embed in the culture of Children's Services, and a more proactive approach to involving people and leading meaningful consultation. The team that supports him needs to be of the highest quality and to demonstrate a strong sense of cohesion, urgency, responsibility and leadership. Whilst there are some signs of this developing, our impressions are that current approaches are too dominated by individuals focusing on their immediate areas of responsibility. People at this level need to demonstrate the willingness and ability to take wider responsibility and the pace of improvement and the leadership challenge need to be driven much harder and faster.

Transforming Children's Services requires great leadership and management at every level. It requires leadership of a whole system – going way beyond the management and overseeing of individual and incremental improvements. This isn't about half a dozen individuals in senior roles within Children's Services being expected to implement a dramatic turnaround – it is about people at all levels of the Directorate and beyond demonstrating a relentless drive to transform attitudes, approaches and systems in order to deliver for children and young people in the city.

We observed a tendency in the council and among partners to 'blame the social worker' for the problems in Children's Services. This culture needs to be re-framed. Even the best social workers will struggle to operate in an environment where the supporting infrastructure is not fully geared to supporting and enabling them and where the culture is not conducive. The leadership and management within the Directorate need to win 'hearts and minds', the achievement of which is facilitated by setting and celebrating clear standards whilst dealing speedily with unacceptable professional performance. The organisational culture needs to be forward looking and to foster ownership, accountability and compliance. Tackling the host of secondary impediments that act as a barrier to the effective working of staff would represent a very positive start. This includes issues around IT, supervision, caseloads and car parking at work for staff needing to undertake visits. A number of long standing infrastructure problems were evident, which need to be addressed and which will require a more flexible and proactive approach from HR and ICT support in particular.

Bringing together on a regular basis the most senior leaders across all partner agencies will be essential to drive forward the required improvements. We recognise that a number of established forums and groupings already exist that bring various partners together at regular intervals. What we are suggesting is a 'War Cabinet' type of body that draws key representatives together more informally, from whatever organisations might be necessary, in order to ensure unified approaches, provide the opportunity for the rapid removal of impediments to progress and enable people to feel they have an influential stake.

The leadership of the LSCB is much improved recently. However, the LSCB has become too operational over time, probably to compensate for weaknesses elsewhere. The statutory role of the LSCB is to bring partners together to ensure effectively co-ordinated procedures and to enable partners to monitor and review each other's performance, among other tasks. The Strategic Director of People has a key leadership role in helping to disentangle the operational and monitoring functions in order to enable the LSCB partnership to assume its statutory function of holding partners to account for the quality of safeguarding in the city. There would also be benefit in looking at how the LSCB and Scrutiny in the council can work together to examine safeguarding, avoiding the risk of duplication and making the best use of resources and expertise.

## **Change Management**

Change management has a poor track record in Children's Services over a considerable period. This is recognised and action is being taken to address it. Recruitment to twelve new change management posts is currently underway and will assist in tackling some of the capacity problems that have led to the lack of successful achievement of change, but a stronger and higher quality of project and programme management is required, along with more proactive and positive corporate and partnership support. Better horizon scanning would help earlier identification of where change will be required and there is a need for more systematic sequencing of change initiatives. The sequencing reflected in the emerging strategy for improving outcomes



for children and young people suggests lessons are being learnt and that there is recognition of the need to prioritise given capacity constraints.

The leadership of Children's Services is right in emphasising a tighter focus on what is most important for achieving improved outcomes for children, young people and families – again reflecting recognition of the need to prioritise – and the need to ensure actions are seen through to a conclusion. If something is important it needs to be implemented fully. Recent changes have had some success – for example there is strong evidence that the work of the Business Improvement Team in monitoring and chasing case progress is producing better outcomes for children. Similarly, implementation of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) has been successful, although it now needs major up-scaling.

There has been a promising start in relation to 'early help' but the offer lacks overall coherence and strong multi-agency buy-in. It requires sustained momentum by all partners across provision and commissioning, leading to the approach becoming deeply embedded across all agencies – although we recognise that this will neither be easy nor quick to achieve. However, given increasing demand coupled with diminishing resources, 'early help' represents a key strand in the drive to address the financial challenge. More fundamentally, it will deliver better outcomes. There needs to be a paradigm shift from waiting until something becomes a safeguarding risk because the increasing level of demand, combined with reducing resource, sees the risk threshold being raised ever higher. Drawing in learning from elsewhere on how best to proceed in relation to 'early help' may well prove extremely beneficial.

## **Communications**

The Strategic Director has made internal and external communications simpler and better. He is engaging widely, is very visible within Children's Services and is reaching out to partner agencies. He comes across well in the national media. His simpler and better approach now needs to be developed into a comprehensive communications strategy, recognising that the appetite amongst staff and partners for information and engagement is and will continue to be enormous and that he cannot, and nor should he seek to, meet the demand himself. The Lead Member has a key role to play in communications, along with the Leader and new Chief Executive, and the senior team supporting the Strategic Director will need to play a leading role in the winning of 'hearts and minds'. It is important that key messages are continuously disseminated, there is meaningful consultation and a clear feedback loop is established which enables frontline practitioners to input their views, thinking and ideas.

## **Workforce**

There has very recently been some improvement in recruitment and retention within Children's Services and the positive engagement of both corporate and Directorate teams in this endeavour has been a welcome break from the past. There are a number of measures in train to improve quality at the frontline, including the current recruitment and retention activity, a proposed increase in the workforce going forward (as reflected

in the strategy for improvement and discussions on the council's budget) and the re-establishment of smaller teams to reduce the management span of supervision. All of this is a welcome step forward. However, whilst there are these positive moves and there are some signs of improvement to overall staffing, the position remains fragile with high sickness absence levels and vacancy rates, significant numbers of agency staff and a lack of experienced social workers. Morale is low amongst social work teams.

Care needs to be taken in the message that the priority is to 'improve the capacity and quality of social work **practice**' as distinct from improving social workers. This is a sophisticated message that needs to be carefully articulated so that it is heard correctly.

Fundamentally, there needs to be better recognition and celebration of what motivates and empowers people working within Children's Services and across the children's partnership – which is essentially 'being able to make a difference'.

Through the peer review process we have sought to highlight the positive developments that have taken place recently but we have also outlined some major issues and key challenges. It has been our aim to provide some further detail on them through this letter in order to help you consider them. However, it may well be that you wish to develop a deeper understanding of aspects of what we have outlined. Members of the review team would be happy to contribute to this and the LGA is happy to support and facilitate that happening.

Once again, thank you for commissioning the review and to everyone involved for their participation. In particular, the team are grateful to Seamus Gaynor and Kalbir Sangha who provided sterling support in both the preparation for the review and during the on-site week.

All of us connected with the peer review would like to wish the council and partners every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Howard Davis', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

**Howard Davis**  
**Principal Adviser, West Midlands**  
**Local Government Association**