

Matt Jukes

Chief Executive

Kingston-Upon-Hull City Council

By email

**Department for Education  
St Paul’s Place, Sheffield**

**Tel: 01142 742420**[**www.gov.uk/dfe**](http://www.gov.uk/dfe)

22 July 2022

Dear Matt

**DfE PROGRESS REVIEW: June 2022**

Firstly, we would like to thank the Children’s Services team for organising the helpful meetings on 23 June 2022. It was great to hear from the leadership team and discussions with parents/carers and the SENCOs added a valuable dimension to our overall picture of progress, and we are grateful to all those who gave up their time to participate.

For children’s social care, we focussed the review on the six areas for improvement that the DfE appointed commissioner, Paul Moffat, recommended be the council’s focus following his last review in January. Those were: reducing reliance on agency staff; investment in training and development for frontline workers, newly qualified staff and team managers; joining up of services when children and young people move between agencies; ensuring timescales for assessment are met; communicating with and listening to the lived experience of service users and putting that at the core of decision-making; and a relentless focus on the number of children in care. We also explored Hull’s plans to maintain the current trajectory of improvement in the event of a positive Ofsted ILACS.

For SEND we focussed the review on the two remaining areas of weakness outstanding from the 2019 revisit inspection and subsequent biannual Accelerated Progress Plan (APP) reviews: co-production and joint commissioning, with a particular focus on the neurodiversity pathway.

We committed to provide written feedback of our general findings and recommendations.

**General Findings**

Children’s Social Care

Overall, we found an improving picture across all the areas of focus.

It was great to hear that Hull’s social care workforce is now more stable, leading to fewer changes in social worker for the children and families in Hull. The reduction in caseloads, internal progression, improved learning and development offer and the new retention offer were cited as reasons for the increase in staff morale and the reduction in leavers.

This stability has allowed Hull’s relationship with workforce agencies to change so that poor quality work is no longer accepted. Work to ‘grown your own’ social workers has begun in earnest and should continue to be a focus for the council as a way to further reduce Hull’s reliance on agency staff.

The learning and development offer continues to improve. Investment in the social work academy, a continued focus on the signs of safety practice model and the newly refreshed practice standards are all positive developments. These should be built on by the council and it is important that they be valued and owned by staff at all levels of the organisation.

It was refreshing to hear about the approach taken by Hull to the issues around transferring cases between agencies. This joint problem solving of a shared issue has led to a set of principles that partners jointly own and can hold each other to account for within a clear governance structure. It will be important to review the effectiveness of this mechanism for holding partners to account through the accountability council over the coming months.

It was great to hear that more assessments are being done on time, and how management oversight is contributing to this. The use of live data to focus on timeliness alongside a relentless focus on embedding the practice model to ensure good quality assessment was reassuring.

A huge amount of work has gone into communicating with and listening to the lived experience of service users in Hull. This feels like an incredibly important shift in both culture and practice. It was good to hear the real-life examples of how this is shaping policy and practice in Hull to better meet the needs of the children and families you serve.

Hull’s focus on reducing the number of legacy cases of children looked after was clearly evident in the statistics presented at the review.

From a financial perspective, budgets were presented as reflective of current and projected activity. There remains some concern about inflationary pressures going forward, and a solution to the schools’ sufficiency funding gap is yet to be found, although discussions are still ongoing.

In terms of Hull’s plans in the event of a successful ILACS, it was great to hear that you intend to retain the Improvement Board and Kay Durrant as the independent chair, with the ambition to achieve good and then outstanding services. It was reassuring to hear that the whole council is committed to the continuous improvement of children’s services, and the ambition to become a Child Friendly City demonstrates this wider commitment.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

It was clear at the review that co-production in Hull is good, and the creation of a steering group and coproduction audit tool should ensure that it is fully embedded in how SEND in the local area develops. It is also promising that the strong parent carer forum is exploring ways to ensure it reaches even broader groups of parents, that parents feel the local offer is accessible and reflects the city well, and that SENCO survey data showed positive trends on collaborative working with professionals, parents, and families.

We also heard positive feedback from some parents who have accessed the recently established neurodiversity pathway and praise for practitioners. However, we also heard of recruitment struggles, and concerns from parents and particularly SENCOs that more communication is needed, particularly around referral criteria and how the new pathway has and will affect SENCO resourcing. We acknowledge that it is in ‘proof of concept’ phase and that positive steps are already being taken in some places to adapt the model as it develops following feedback.

**Next Steps**

Overall, we were presented with a positive view of progress in Hull. The drive to improve is evident, and a good balance seems to have been struck between ensuring change happens at pace, whilst carefully implementing the change so as not to overwhelm staff. This is particularly impressive given the extenuating circumstances of the last two years. Since 2020, we have seen - through reviews, commissioners’ reports and Ofsted monitoring visits - sustained progress in Hull. The impact of having a stable and determined leadership team, partnership engagement, committed elected members and sufficient funding is clear. Investment in Hull’s workforce has been and continues to be a high priority, and the cultural shift in practice is starting to have a positive impact on the experience of service users.

Over the next six months we would like to see a continued focus on the areas highlighted in the Commissioner’s final report, in particular workforce recruitment, retention, development and oversight. We would like to see a commitment from the Council's leadership team to a relentless focus on improving practice through the Improvement Board and local Safeguarding Partnership. We would also like to be reassured that the budget is stabilised and sustainable. On SEND, we will retain the APP to support and challenge on the developing neurodiversity pathway only, with the next review to take place in January 2023. We also expect you to engage with DfE’s SEND advisor, Anne Hayward, to address the recent decline in EHCP timeliness, which we understand relates to the need to embed the recent and welcome restructuring of, and investment in, the SEND team.

We believe that over the past 2 and a half years sufficient progress has been made for the DfE appointed Commissioner to step down from his role in Hull. We also plan to replace the Statutory Direction with an Improvement Notice (see draft attached) which sets out how the Council should work with the Department’s Children’s Social Care intervention until some such time that the Secretary of State is satisfied this is no longer required. The revocation of the statutory direction is in recognition of the clear improvements Hull has made to its Children’s Social Care services and SEND since March 2020.

I am copying this letter to Pauline Turner, Cllr. Tock and Cllr. Ross

Yours sincerely

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| **Jason Bennett**  Vulnerable Children’s Unit  Yorkshire and Humber Region  DfE |  |

**Improvement Notice [DRAFT]**

To: Kingston Upon Hull City Council (‘the council’)

The Guildhall

Alfred Gelder Street

Hull

HU1 2AA

**This Improvement Notice is issued to (Kingston Upon) Hull City Council (the Council) on xx July 2022. This was done on the advice of the Children’s Services Commissioner, who has also stepped down from his role, on the basis that children’s social care services have improved enough since March 2020 to no longer require this level of scrutiny. The Council’s children’s social care services were identified as inadequate in the Ofsted inspection report published 17 May 2019 and so this Improvement Notice should remain in place until sufficient evidence has been provided by Ofsted as reinspection.**

1. This Notice is given to address all the areas for improvement identified in the report of the inspection of the Council’s children’s social care services dated 17 May 2019
2. A particular focus should continue to be given to the areas for improvement recommended by the DfE appointed Commissioner (the Commissioner) as follows:
   1. Reducing reliance on agency staff
   2. Ongoing investment in training and development for frontline workers and newly qualified staff and Team Managers
   3. Joining up of services when children and young people move between agencies.
   4. Ensuring timescales for assessments are met
   5. Communicating with and listening to the lived experience of service users and putting that at the core of all decision making. The expertise of families, knowledge about their children’s needs and personal responsibilities need to be harnessed to support planning, progression and decision making.
   6. Continue a relentless focus on the numbers of children in care ensuring the legacy issues are addressed so children can be moved on to alternative arrangements when the time is right
3. To comply with this Notice, the following actions are required of the council, working with its partner agencies (“partners”) as identified by the Children Act 2004 (Section 11).

**Intervention arrangements**

1. The statutory direction issued to the Council under s.497A of the Education Act 1996, dated 16 March 2020, is revoked.
2. The council will work with the Department for Education’s intervention officials (the intervention officials) until some such time that the Secretary of State is satisfied this is no longer required.

**Improvement plan**

1. The council’s improvement plan will deliver appropriate and sustainable improvement. The plan should cover the areas identified in the Ofsted report of 17 May 2019as well as recommendations made by the adviser appointed by the Department.
2. To ensure there is clear evidence of progression:
   1. the content of the improvement plan and a record of progress against it must be kept up to date;
   2. the council must ensure there is an improvement board with an independent chair in place to oversee implementation of the improvement plan and report to the improvement board on progress against the objectives in the plan, to a timetable agreed with the Department. It can commission updates from partners in order to do this;
   3. reports to the improvement board should include data, analysis and recommendations supported by evidence of impact of improvements on the quality of practice and experience of children and families;
   4. the council should highlight those objectives which are slow to progress and highlight where contributions need to be strengthened; and
   5. the views of frontline staff and of children and young people will be taken into consideration in the development of practice and standards.

**Department for Education reviews**

1. Officials or advisers from the Department will undertake reviews of progress against the improvement agenda at least every six months and more regularly where appropriate.
2. These reviews may cover but are not exclusive to: culture; performance; leadership, management and governance; workforce and management oversight; early help; and multi-agency arrangements.
3. From time to time, the intervention officials may require that a diagnostic review or assessment of performance in a specific service area is undertaken by a local authority or other party agreed with the Department.
4. For any review or assessment, the council must provide the person(s) conducting it with:
   1. access to, and time with, staff and leadership;
   2. accurate and up to date data on performance and quality;
   3. facilities to carry out the reviews;
   4. access to case files, minutes of meetings, supervision records or any other relevant information.
5. Prior to any reviews, the council should provide its own assessment of improvement. This may reflect, but is not limited to:
   1. progress against the improvement plan objectives;
   2. staff surveys;
   3. staff supervision and the quality of feedback.
6. Taking account of the measures set out in this improvement notice, the Council should aim for actions included in the improvement plan to be delivered by 31 December 2022 or sooner, where appropriate.

**Failure to comply with this Improvement Notice by the assessment dates or poor progress:**

1. Should the council be unwilling or unable to comply with this improvement notice, or should ministers not be satisfied with the council’s progress at any stage, ministers may choose to invoke their statutory powers of intervention (s497A Education Act 1996) to direct the council to enter into an appropriate arrangement to secure the improvements required in children’s services.

**Signed:** …………………………………………….. **Date:** …………………………

**Carolan Goggin**

**A senior civil servant in the Department for Education**