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Mr Robert Henderson
Executive Director of Children and Learning
Southampton City Council

Sent by email to: Robert.Henderson@southampton.gov.uk

Dear Rob

Annual engagement meeting about social care and education, 30 March 2023

Thank you for meeting with Peter Cox, Carolyn Adcock, James Broadbridge and myself to discuss social care and education in Southampton.

We talked about financial arrangements. You explained these are under discussion. The budget is £62.7 million in 2023/24, up from £47 million in 2017, however you have seen a significant increase in demand. The savings target for children's services is £7 million this year. You are expecting to make a number of savings including by reducing the number of children in care, saving £1.9 million on agency staff, and a further reduction of residential placements, which was 64 and is now 42. You have £800,000 from the DfE 'staying close' money. You recognised the pressure but hope to be in a steady state in a year's time.

You noted that the council elections take place in May this year and that you work hard to achieve cross-party support and understanding of children's social care services.

Education

We discussed improvements and challenges in the early years sector, starting with staffing shortages. You and your colleagues identified this as the biggest single threat to the sector. In your view there are simply too many other opportunities in the jobs market which pay better, so staff are leaving and are hard to replace. Your analysis shows over half of settings are affected and that staff are leaving for other sectors rather than for other early years opportunities.

On a more positive note your team were very pleased with the sharp rise in the percentage of two-year-olds who are taking advantage of funded places; now up to 88%. This is as a result of better targeted work at families with entitled children, and more effective joined up work with partners such as health visitors. Within those rising numbers of children accessing provision, your staff spoke about the higher percentage of children with special educational needs. In common with the picture nationally, there is much work afoot in the council to

identify whether these are genuine learning difficulties, or delay in key areas such as speech and language caused by the impact of the pandemic. In connection with this it was good to get an update on a new setting, Dingleys, which includes specialist support for children in areas like phonics development.

In relation to schools you made clear the continued impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having generally, and on vulnerable pupils in particular. As leaders, you noted the importance of keeping regular well-being checks on headteachers leading their communities. You reported that the mental health of school staff is of as much a concern to you as that of pupils. In the city, you reported that several experienced headteachers are leaving the profession due to mental health and workload pressures. You commented that availability of high quality prospective headteachers has diminished. Strategically, you are thinking about executive models of leadership in the future to offset recruitment concerns.

Your team acknowledged that published outcomes at the end of key stage 2, key stage 4 and key stage 5 are not good enough, particularly for the most disadvantaged. You have made this clear to school leaders but also believe there is capacity amongst leaders to share best practice. You have communicated these important messages to school governors so they can better fulfil their core functions of governance, namely holding leaders to account for the quality of education. Curriculum thinking has been a training focus for targeted schools. At primary, this has focused on writing in the English curriculum. You are also exploring with schools the curriculum in foundation subjects, in part to ensure key stage 4 pupils are accessing the EBacc. I was pleased to hear you have also approached the multi-academy trusts in the city to work collaboratively on improving outcomes. Frustratingly, you noted that some MAT leaders were not forthcoming.

Improving pupils' behaviour is a key focus for you. Leaders are reporting to you that since the pandemic pupils are struggling emotionally. This has been evident in inspection outcomes this year, with several schools judged as requires improvement or with the possibility of not remaining good. This has made most impact at secondary level. To get behaviour back on track you said some schools are working with the DfE's behaviour hubs. It would be interesting to discuss the impact of this at next year's meeting.

The complexities of need for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) has worsened since the pandemic. You said the challenges of pupils' needs are at an all-time high, and inclusion in mainstream schools is your strategic priority. Nonetheless, you propose to open three additional specially resourced provision units and have increased the number of spaces at special schools. As in the early years team, your staff said they were working with school leaders to check SEND needs are genuine rather than as a result of missed curriculum content.

Alternative provision (AP) remains a focus. I expressed my gratitude that a member of your staff has been working with our team looking at the safe use of AP. You noted supporting headteachers in understanding their statutory obligations when choosing AP. Commissioning agreements are a priority and you believe stakeholders are clearer on their responsibilities.

You are keeping a close eye on possible unregistered providers and checking that what they offer does not constitute them being an illegal school. Positively, you note some vocational offers such as construction have really helped some students.

Moving on to discuss post-16 matters here too we discussed AP as part of your wider work in this area. You explained that the current offer of part time provision at Southampton City College is of limited quality and is ceasing as of September 2023.

We discussed safeguarding, specifically radicalisation and extremism. You are seeing sustained levels of radicalisation, specifically right-wing extremism. Where referrals are made to the Channel Panel, young people with additional needs such as SEND or mental health continue to be a significant feature of the referrals. You note that all providers engage well with this issue, but particularly picked out Southampton City College.

You provided an update to the proposed merger of Southampton City College, Fareham, and Eastleigh. The expected date of merger is 1 August, with a backup date of 1 October. The combined college group is expected to be called the South Hampshire College Group. You confirmed that the principal and new chair of the trust have been appointed. You are pleased that the new college group principal already appears keen to engage with the local authority. At present, there is little information about the curriculum offer, but you are aware that these discussions will be taking place.

You updated us on initiatives to reduce the number of learners not in education, employment, or training (NEET). The reduction of NEETs is a key strategic priority for post-16 within the local authority. You noted responsibility for NEET youngsters has moved from 'skills' to 'education' within the local authority. You provided latest figures which show NEETs have increased to 7.3% against a national picture of 6.9% and a South East figure of 5.2%. You said the local authority is visiting schools and colleges to check the quality of careers advice and guidance. You have identified a need for more training in guidance skills, which will commence in summer 2023. You explained that there has been a significant increase in NEET referrals, largely from the youth justice hub which is placing pressure on capacity. Despite recruiting additional engagement officers, caseloads are high. This is compounded by similar issues of capacity among support staff in colleges.

We discussed the ongoing concerns about the availability of level 2 and below curriculum offer within the city. This has been compounded by the announcement of the withdrawal of traineeships in September 2023. You expressed concern about the risk of unregistered AP moving into this space. The proximity of provision outside of Southampton is such that learners, particularly those with education, health and care plans, look for study beyond the city border. This again means that it is difficult to assure potential providers about the sustainability of programmes. There is uncertainty about whether the new South Hampshire College will be able to pick up this provision, as the curriculum is yet to be rationalised across the campuses.

Social Care

We noted that the self-evaluation was clear and well presented and provided helpful summaries of current performance, together with areas of focus for the coming year. As we agreed, the voice of children was less well represented.

You noted the wide range of activity since the last annual engagement meeting and the focused visit in 2022. You have taken up your role on a permanent basis and the service is in a period of maturation and consolidation. You explained that the permanent leadership team are actively listening to staff and have created a learning culture. You believe that senior managers are visible and are helping staff to feel safe in their work. You are embedding systemic practice, attracting new practitioners and helping existing staff. You described a focus on kindness and compassion, while creating a child-centred service.

You said that consistency is still an issue, but you noted a cultural shift with expectations of high-quality work. Caseloads have fallen to an average of 16.5 and experienced workers say the service is the best that it has ever been. Demand has reduced in most areas and the service is less reactive. Your team described a focus on early help and high impact, although the ongoing shortage of health visitors is an issue. You said you have carried out work with partners regarding thresholds and referral pathways. It is good that you are looking at the section 47 threshold, as a high number do not go on to initial child protection conferences. You think that a reactive service was at play and that numbers are now coming down. You are also holding reflective team meetings with partners such as the police, who have had a lack of confidence in the response from children's services. You are confident in most of your performance data and now have over 90% compliance with audits. You are focusing on the learning loop, getting partners involved and taking this learning into supervision.

You noted significant improvements in the safeguarding service, where there is now a more consistent workforce but with some areas to tackle. The overall numbers of children in the system are not falling. The multi-agency safeguarding hub is getting multiple contacts and services for children in care and care leavers are not robust. Serious youth crime is an issue. Partnership work is taking place to address this. Southampton is also one of three local authorities chosen to be a contextual safeguarding pilot and this is really showing dividends.

Better targeting is leading to a reduction in the number of disabled children who are also classified as children in need, and increasing the numbers in receipt of early help. You are reviewing short breaks and making sure that help is targeted at those most in need.

You told us about work with partners to increase the frequency of dental checks for children in care and noted this continues to be a challenge. You have restructured the monthly health and social care forum, which also has a focus on this work.

We talked about placement stability, which is closely linked to sufficiency of placements. You are trying to ensure that first placements are stable, and to identify fragile placements early. You are working with the Solent NHS Foundation Trust on the emotional resilience service

and will put more resources into that. Part of the brief will be working with children on the edge of care, and stabilising placements. You now have an in-house psychologist in the fostering service. You also noted that you are anticipating that Westwood House, a new children's home, will hopefully open in April of next year but has yet to go through planning.

We talked about services for care leavers. You said that there was a data accounting issue on CareDirector, leading to some inaccurate performance reporting on care leaver data. You are expecting this to be resolved in the next two months. Carolyn asked whether you had evaluated your service against the criteria for the new stand-alone judgement regarding care leavers. You said that you have an ex-Ofsted inspector currently auditing cases, most of which have been found to be RI. You are also planning to re-visit the policies and procedures regarding unregulated and unregistered services. You said that restructuring the pathway team has helped regarding the care leavers service. You have three 16-year-olds in unregistered care, all in local provision. You said you know the providers of good quality supported accommodation in the city, and you carry out quality assurance visits to all settings where children in your care are placed. You are working with providers to ensure that they are aware of the registration requirements.

Carolyn asked about a theme in recent child safeguarding incident notifications regarding disclosures of sexual abuse by children in care, some of which is historic. You said you have already held a table top review of the cases and are considering the learning. We also noted the recent publication of the 'Ted' safeguarding practice review and the helpful briefing notes.

We talked about unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, noting you are not a port of entry. Your target is 51 children and you now have 38. You are working within the five-day limit on accepting young people from the national transfer scheme. Most of the children are in supported accommodation or foster care. You use one house of multiple occupation, which currently accommodates seven children, and you select the young people for this. One person was in bed and breakfast accommodation last week, while an age assessment was disputed. You have five children under 16 and look for a foster placement as the first option for these children. There is one hotel being used by the Home Office but the possibility of another. You are looking at how to manage the young people coming through the hotel. Eight were not age disputed and came into care immediately. You have completed 21 age assessments. You are looking at providing staff training across the pathways team, the independent reviewing officer service and the virtual school.

With regards to workforce, 95% of managers are permanent, and retention is good. You are proud of your leadership team. Over 90% of social workers are permanent. You are now focusing on retention and developing the high number of newly-qualified staff. In terms of retention, you noted the importance of the practice framework. You have also recreated the senior social worker grade, which has been very successful, and you are looking at offering more support regarding resilience. You are reviewing the market supplement. You noted that you are surrounded by other local authorities who are competing for the same staff. You

described a number of initiatives to develop the 'Southampton family', creating an inclusive and diverse community in which your staff can grow and flourish.

You told us about the young people's hub, which we visited after the meeting. You have developed relationships with schools and are developing a 'team around the school' approach. You have worked with two schools with high levels of deprivation, and you are now working with a third. You are wrapping health, policing, and social care communities around the school, looking to reduce the number of professionals involved to about 10, from about 60. The aim is to improve communication and local knowledge. You are also looking at school attendance and exclusion and you are seeking positive initiatives to divert anti-social behaviour. The team around the school is supported by a comprehensive data pack which gives a rich foundation to build on. So far, the outcomes have been better than expected.

We talked about the next inspection, which is due at any time as the last inspection was in 2019. You would prefer it to be as late as is possible in the inspection programme. The context to this is that you believe Southampton is moving determinedly towards 'good' from a very low base, but that you are not there yet. You believe that another 'requires improvement' judgement would be devastating for the service and for staff who have worked so hard to achieve tangible improvements.

You believe that the trajectory to good has been and will continue to be slower than hoped in a few areas. Reasons cited included the current financial context, the ongoing impact of the pandemic, foster carers resigning, over-reliance on residential care and a need to tackle centralised council services such as HR, finance and data. Carolyn suggested that you clearly identify the progress already achieved from the journey that you have been on as a leadership team, to provide context for the inspectors.

Thank you again for making the time to meet with us.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "S Long". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the bottom.

Stephen Long

Assistant Regional Director, South East

Please note: This letter is not published by Ofsted and the comments made have not been evaluated as part of an inspection.