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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, 4 July 2024

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

Social Care

Thank you for sharing your detailed self-evaluation (SEF) and explaining to us the current context in Southampton. This included information about the key strengths, challenges, and the areas you aspire to further develop and improve. You told us that the numbers of children and families that you support are now in line with your statistical neighbours. You also described the areas of practice development in response to the findings from the 2023 ILACS inspection. This included awareness raising and data reporting of private fostering; the creation of a specialist team of practitioners to support your unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children and young people, and the actions to develop the offer of services to support your growing population of care experienced young people. You have specifically developed the 'drop in' sessions which provide information and support to care leavers to help them access education, employment and training opportunities as well as other helpful practical advice and support with accommodation options.

The helpful update provided about the extensive whole service transformation work was interesting. This work has been underway for some time and has recently reached its final stages. You described the need to do this to ensure that you meet the needs of

Southampton City's children and their families. You also described the need for this to offer best value. You have implemented a variety of strategies as part of this work, which include a reduction in the number of heads of service, creating additional middle management capacity and generating funding to support you in developing key areas of practice to help you achieve your goals.

The most significant change is the implementation of your chosen practice model and approach, 'The family safeguarding model'. Staff have accessed training to support them in applying this approach and you told us about some of the positive feedback you have received from staff regarding this. You informed us about some current challenges being encountered in appointing adult mental health workers for the service and you have a plan to address this.

You have told us that you have 40 UAS children in your care currently and that you are near your required quota through the national transfer scheme. The ILACS visit in 2023 triggered you to move swiftly to develop a specialist team to support this group of children. This service is now in place, and you are ensuring that staff have the required skills to do this specialist work. Some of these young people are currently living in semi-independent accommodation arrangements. You also told us about your plans to improve your sufficiency of in-house foster carers who can offer care to these children.

You currently have 42 young people living in supported accommodation and it is your understanding that all the providers applied in time and so are operating under the exemption. We reminded you of the portal which you can access to assure yourselves of this information. You have also been successful in gaining additional money via a DfE grant to develop and improve your staying close offer. You have two children placed in unregistered children's homes at this time and you have measures in place to assure yourselves of the quality of these arrangements. You are progressing your plans to open two children's homes, and these are on target to be in place by Spring 2025. One of these is a joint venture with health.

You updated us about your work in response to the changes to Working Together. These include developing a safeguarding partnership which incorporates children, adults, and the community safeguarding board. This will be chaired by the chief executive of Southampton City Council. You reported that partnership working across the city appears to be stronger than it has ever been. The partnership continue to use a scrutineer to provide additional professional challenge to these arrangements.

The update about the work you have been doing to introduce your alternatively qualified workers was interesting. You are awaiting formal sign off and agreement to your process, procedures, and protocols regarding this work. While you await this, you have continued to assess and put plans in place to ensure workers are equipped and supported with their practice. You described in your self-evaluation the skills audit which has taken place, to support you with your understanding of workers' skills, capabilities, and areas for further development.

You set out in your self-evaluation document and through the discussion, the areas of practice that have improved. Specifically, the progress made to sustain and stabilise the workforce and reduce the use of agency staff. You also described your initiatives to 'grow your own', alongside the impact and measures in place to support a less experienced workforce.

We were very sorry to hear about the recent death of a care experienced young person. Thank you for providing us with the update regarding this and the arrangements in place to support their family and your staff.

You have told us that your topic preferences for a focused visit would include children in care and care leavers.

Education

You detailed recent changes to the structure of learning and SEND services aimed at improving attainment, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, enhancing attendance, and reducing exclusions, which have recently spiked in the authority. To achieve these goals, you are in the process of recruiting a temporary Director of Transformation.

You highlighted numerous successes and achievements of the local authority this year. These include improving the quality of performance information and culture, attributed in part to the recruitment of a Principal Data Analyst who is now tracking data against the education strategy. The number of not in education, employment, or training (NEET) 'unknowns' has been reduced to below the national average, allowing better support for these young people. You are rightly proud that the number of outstanding and good schools in the area exceeds the national average and are pleased with the positive feedback from the recent area SEND inspection. Additionally, the relaunch of the Young Carers program has resulted in a 500% increase in disclosures of caring responsibilities from children and young people in the past 12 months, a move praised by schools and colleges. This initiative enables a better understanding and support for these vulnerable learners, particularly where it impacts on NEETs and disadvantaged communities.

We discussed the Council's support for education leaders, including the recent Education Leaders Conference, where governors and leaders participated in talks and workshops on leadership, moral purpose, and culture building. The 'By Heads, For Heads' program for new or aspiring heads was also described, which plays a vital role in strengthening leadership and resilience in the area.

In terms of progress and attainment, you noted that 18 out of 20 inspections in the last 12 months were graded as outstanding or good. 79% of pupils attend outstanding or good schools, rising to 98% for early years settings. Early years development levels are in line with the national average. Reading and mathematics at key stage 1 meet expected standards and are in line with national averages, while key stage 2 writing is slightly below the national average. Key stage 2 reading and mathematics meet expected levels and align

with statistical neighbour averages. At key stage 4, the attainment 8 score is above the statistical neighbour average, and the EBacc performance is in line with this measure.

Reading has been a long-term focus, with initiatives for targeted support yielding significant improvements. Early data indicates continued positive progress in these schools. Efforts to achieve greater depth in writing for more able pupils have also seen success, with one school reporting a 33% increase in attainment due to direct work with consultants.

Attendance has been identified as a specific concern. The full implementation of the 'working together' guidance has received positive feedback from the DfE attendance advisor. The Southampton attendance group prioritises pupil absence, with recent data showing reductions in overall absence rates across all phases, especially in primary schools. Future efforts will target secondary phase attendance and SEND support, supported by multi-agency meetings for immediate advice and support. Discussions with healthcare providers are also underway to better manage absence certifications.

Despite high exclusion rates, significant efforts have been made to prevent increases. The primary issues remain with male learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, areas of deprivation, and SEND support. Notably, the three schools with the highest exclusion rates are seeing reductions, attributed to new leadership and better collaboration with the local authority. The exclusion working group is organising additional de-escalation training and aligning social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) outreach work with primary heads to improve exclusion rates. A new two-part exclusion training program for governors and senior leaders is being developed, along with a trial of a new approach to sixth-day provision for better reintegration. Investments in emotional literacy support assistants and forest schools are also being monitored for their impact on improving behaviour. Additionally, governors are now overturning more exclusions, reflecting stronger governance.

Currently, 209 learners are on reduced timetables, primarily in secondary provision, and from disadvantaged backgrounds, including SEND support. These decisions are made through multi-agency collaboration. A strategic review of this area is planned, along with more focused internal training for schools.

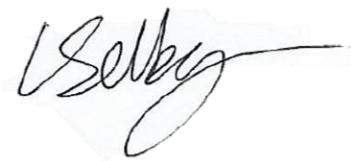
The quality assurance of potential alternative provision (AP) is well established, with appropriate advice and guidance provided to all schools. Further training on safeguarding, transition support, and best practices in recording and monitoring progress for AP learners is planned.

Post-16 learner progress was also discussed. You reiterated the success in reducing NEET unknowns, crediting the restructuring of the careers hub for improved careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) in the area. However, the proportion of learners at risk of NEET remains high, and the resilience of young people is low. The careers hub staff are working closely with schools, colleges, and youth provision to encourage college enrolment. A curriculum mapping exercise has been completed, noting an increase in learners studying level 2 English and mathematics, matching national trends. Concerns were raised about the loss of provision due to a recent college merger.

Regarding early years provision, you now complete termly sufficiency data, enabling close tracking of availability. There is sufficient availability of places in the region. Efforts are being made to support the recruitment and retention of early years staff, with retention identified as the primary issue. Celebratory initiatives and the development of a newly qualified practitioner program aim to support staff in their first year of practice, allowing the local authority to better shape the curriculum and meet employers' business needs.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "L Selby", is written over a light blue rectangular background.

Lee Selby

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.