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24 July 2018

North East Yorkshire and Humber  
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Martin Gray  
Director of Children's Services  
Municipal Buildings  
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Stockton-on-Tees  
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Dear Martin

Thank you for meeting with Bob Morton, Senior HMI, Jan Edwards HMI and me on 16 July 2018 to provide an update on both current performance and progress in Stockton children's services.

The information in your self-evaluation provided a clear picture of the progress made since the SIF inspection in 2016. The associated improvement plan draws on the progress made from the SIF, the peer challenge on children in care and the JTAI in November 2017. We observed that the improvement plan could be strengthened by: identifying a named responsible individual against each objective to sharpen accountability; including milestone points at which progress can be checked, and timescales to counter the potential for drift.

Two of the main challenges you described were around stabilising the workforce and continuing to adopt a less risk adverse approach to aspects of decision making. The progress made in the successful recruitment of experienced social workers has enabled you to shift the focus to social worker development and the quality and consistency of practice. You report this has led to manageable caseloads and team managers having a reasonable span of control. Your view is that the role of assistant team managers is also helping to focus on the quality of practice.

The high numbers of children looked after continues to be an area of focus for your authority. You are working with Dartington Social Research Unit to better understand your approach to decision making. You have started to see an impact on the number of children who are entering care for the first time. However, you know there is more to do in achieving a plan for 'going home' earlier for some children who remain in care.

With regard to sufficiency, you report developing services around edge of care, similar to the No Wrong Door model, which has been successful in stabilising young people who would otherwise have been in out of area placements. This also includes the development of multi-systemic therapy, family group conferencing, and opening more children's units with your joint venture partners.

The high numbers of children in need you indicated is being addressed through the work across teams to identify those cases which could be stepped down to an early help intervention. You are being helped to shift thinking about what requires a social work intervention through a seconded post from Lincolnshire children's services. You noted as having addressed, the requirement of an early help assessment to access services, which was placing unnecessary demand on partners.

You described the work of the Virtual School as having the biggest impact most recently in introducing a trauma informed and attachment focus to help schools better support children who are in care. So far, 45 schools and colleges have undertaken the PAC-UK training. You reported that the Virtual School has developed strong partnerships and is challenging and supporting schools through an improved data set.

Of concern to you is the high and rising numbers of fixed term exclusions, which is putting pressure on alternative provisions. You recognise the impact of exclusions on children and you are investing in helping schools to think differently about exclusions and managed moves but this has yet to yield a turnaround in their use, particularly in two schools.

We noted the relatively high proportion of E-bacc entries in Stockton compared to elsewhere in the region and nationally. You clarified that this has not arisen due to a local authority wide intent and noted the figure varies widely across secondary schools in the local authority area.

In response to the JTAI on neglect in November 2017 you are extending your partnership with Hartlepool Children's Services to develop joint safeguarding arrangements with a focus on the quality of practice through multi-agency audits.

Work is being undertaken to engage young people to develop services across Stockton, referred to as Bright Futures, Big Minds. While at an early stage, you are looking at various social media including the local authority website to encourage consultation opportunities.

You summarised that you see 2018 as being a critical year for Stockton and that you are starting to see improvements against the improvement plan, particularly with the efficiency of the front door and cases being de-escalated to early help. You hope to

see the impact of the edge of care developments on the numbers of children looked after by the end of the financial year.

Looking forward, we discussed that a further focussed visit by Ofsted under the Integrated Local Authority Children's Services inspection framework before the next judgement inspection would not be required. Instead it is likely that a short inspection would be scheduled in 2019.

Thank you again for meeting with us. The SHMI social care and Jan will keep in touch to maintain an ongoing dialogue with the local authority.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C Kirby", followed by a period.

Cathryn Kirby

**Regional Director, North East, Yorkshire and Humber**