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Bradley Simmons HMI
Regional Director

Ms Jo Olsson
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Dear Jo,

Thank you for meeting with me, Shirley Bailey, Senior HMI and Michelle Oxley, Regulatory Inspection Manager on 30 January 2018. Please extend our thanks to your colleagues for their valuable contributions to the meeting.

Social Care

You provided us with a comprehensive overview of the local authority's self-evaluation. While it is not possible to make reference to all areas covered in such a wide-ranging discussion we were left with a clear sense of the key milestones in the local authority's improvement journey, the challenges that remain and plans for future improvement.

You noted that there has been significant investment in children's services. The local authority is clearly proactive in seeking out opportunities to learn from and contribute to sector led improvement both through your collaboration with Essex through partners in practice and regional peer reviews. You are confident that this continued focus on creating the conditions for good social work to flourish led by a strong leadership team has resulted in significant practice improvements since the local authority was judged as inadequate for the protection of children in 2013 and as requires improvement in the SIF in 2015. However, you advised us that there remains variability in the quality of frontline practice, and that you are realistic that there is more to be done before children and young people in Devon receive a consistently good service that results in improved outcomes for them.

You advised us that you have introduced three new service priorities that you are confident will support continuous improvement. Every child will have and up-to-date assessment, every child will have a SMART plan and practitioners will have regular supervision that supports excellent practice. You have undertaken a range of actions to facilitate delivery of these priorities including: implementation of Eclipse to support practitioners' case recording and to improve management information; increased staffing in those areas of the county where demand is highest such as the south of the county and providing stable leadership in the north which you report is driving up standards and leading to some innovative practice.

You reflected that while the introduction of Eclipse was not without its challenges it was necessary as the previous system was not fit for purpose. You are confident that the software will allow for deeper comprehensive analysis of information, performance and quality assurance. You advised that its implementation affected reporting in the last quarter of 2017/18 and the first quarter of 2018/19 and will affect the last quarter of 2018/19. However, auditing of practice gives you confidence that 'dips' in performance are due to recording issues as the system becomes fully embedded.

You advised us that a recent peer review of the MASH by colleagues from Gloucestershire found that children receive a timely response, thresholds are appropriately applied, and early help and triage services were noted as a strength. You advised that minor changes to processes are underway following the review such as the reclassification of 'no further action' on assessments.

You noted that you have seen a 5.5 percentage point increase in referrals and an increase in re-referrals from 21% to 24%. From April 2019 you intend to look into re-referrals in greater detail to better understand the underlying reasons for the increase and as part of this work you will also look into repeat contacts to assure yourselves that children are receiving the right level of service at the right time.

We noted that current performance information shows that 77% of assessments are completed within the statutory timescales of 45 days and that most are completed within 30-45 days. You anticipate that the development of a tracking dashboard will lead to an increased focus on timeliness to ensure that assessments are completed within a timescale that is right for children. You advised that your priority to date has been the quality of assessments and safeguarding arrangements. You are confident that the use of reviewing officers to oversee child in need reviews is contributing to more robust planning for children.

We noted that in line with the national trend the rate of children subject to a child protection plan at 33 per 10k has increased but remains lower than statistical neighbours and the national average. Despite the increase, timeliness of initial child protection conferences has substantially improved at 90% within 15 days in December 2018 compared to 67% in 2017-18. However, re-registrations have increased slightly to 26% from 25%. We reflected that this was an area of performance that you identified at the last annual conversation was in part due to some risk averse decision making by partner agencies and that the trend is continuing.

In relation to children in care the local authority has maintained a strong focus on achieving stability for children by increasing sufficiency and quality of placements within a very challenging market place. You shared with us a wide range of actions both undertaken and planned that underpin your sufficiency strategy. I was pleased to hear that you are beginning to see some positive results for children with the number of children who have moved three or more times decreasing and that there are currently no children under the age of 16 in unregulated provision. I note that your sufficiency strategy has been shared through peninsula group and has included detailed work to improve market access and associated processes such as matching needs of children.

You were clear that your overall strategy is to exercise greater control to allow a focus on quality including providing more services in-house. I was interested to hear that you are developing two multi-disciplinary crisis units in partnership with CAHMS, which includes residential support for up to three months and lead to an appropriate placement or return home. You advised that the local authority is also in-sourcing four residential short breaks and that you aim to provide more services within the child's home that will further reduce demand.

I would also like to thank you for the constructive and effective working relationships that your commissioning team has maintained with Ofsted as part of a shared commitment to improving standards in the sector across the region.

In relation to the education of children in care we heard that attendance of children in Devon is normally in line with or above national averages and that exclusion rates and the numbers of children in Pupil Referral Units have decreased due to an increased effort at keeping children in mainstream schools. You advised that the virtual school analyses attendance, repeated lateness and underperformance to gain a greater understanding of this issue for individual children and any trends but that the results may be hard to extrapolate across the spectrum due to some very unique cases. You recognise that progress in narrowing the gap between children in care and their peers year on year is inconsistent. For example, in 2017-18 primary phase outcomes fell while at key stage 4 outcomes in English and Maths improved. You believe this is due to an increase in individuals in their GCSE year coming into care. You reflected that children in this group can achieve highly with additional tuition, but it is not consistent. You informed us that your key priorities moving forward are to raise attainment in all key stages, increase the number of young people in Years 12 and 13 who are in Education, Employment or Training, reduce exclusions and ensure all children in care are in appropriate schools.

The health of children in care and care leavers is given appropriate priority including their mental health and emotional health and well-being and you advised that a survey conducted by the university of Bristol gave some illuminating insights into emotional wellbeing with carers, social connections with carers and the child's lived experience.

In relation to care leavers I was pleased to hear that you have continued to build on learning from the findings of the focused visit in November 2018 and a care leaver peer review undertaken by Cornwall which you will reciprocate later this year. You advised that you are carrying out increased tracking of progress and dropping out rates of care leavers at further education providers and that currently, 29 care leavers are supported in higher education with good stability. Apprenticeships schemes for care leavers include a wide range of employers and 'in touch' figures are improving and may be better with slight underreporting following Eclipse implementation.

Adoption performance appears strong against the adoption scorecard. You advised that the local authority is reviewing practice across the county and the use of special guardianship orders is a growth area with the local authority carrying out statistical analysis on the number of children being supported and how.

You advised that the local authority along with partner agencies have established a multi-agency forum to respond to the increased targeting of Devon in relation to county lines that includes the targeting of vulnerable adults as well as children. New strategies in place include more thorough processes for return home interviews when children have gone missing from home or care and the analysis of trends.

In relation to staff morale the local authority notes that social workers are positive and feel more empowered as they have greater management and supervision of case records.

I was pleased to hear that social work caseloads have reduced to an average of 17.6 with reduced variance across teams and that while there remain significant challenges in social work recruitment in some parts of the county you are maintaining a focus on creating a stable workforce including, where necessary, the recruitment of long term locum staff.

Thank you for your frankness in sharing your evaluation that while progress has been made the overall effectiveness of children's services is not yet good. In our meeting I shared with you that at this time Ofsted believes a next visit would most likely be a focused visit or a JTAI. I am aware that you have subsequently discussed potential areas of focus with Shirley Bailey, SHMI and have identified children in need or services for disabled children as areas that the local authority considers appropriate.

Early Years

We noted that 97.5% (check figure) of providers in Devon are judged good or outstanding. This figure is better than the regional and national averages. You are pleased with the take up offer early education for two-year olds, at 91%: for three and four-year olds the figure is still higher at 94%. Overall, 71.7% of children reached a good level of development (GLD) by the end of the early years foundation stage in 2018. This placed Devon 70 of 150 in the local authority rankings. The percentage of those children on free school meals (49%) who reached a GLD was disappointing in comparison, with a ranking of 135 of 150. You rightly noted that the attainment gap between girls and boys has marginally reduced, with a difference of 14.1 percentage points in girls' favour. This reduction follows a pattern seen nationwide. You noted your concern that the percentage of free school meal pupils in EYFS has fallen to 54% to 49%. We noted that this is not a national trend and that those now entitled to FSMs are, you believe, a very challenged group. You also noted that early years providers with a greater proportion of FSM pupils are doing significantly less well than those with fewer of these pupils. In order to tackle this, you noted that you are targeting support for six providers with high proportions of children on FSM and special education needs and disabilities SEND, through a "lighting up learning" project. In addition, you are focusing on providers in Torridge, as this area has, in general, providers with greater proportions of children on FSM. Your strategies include additional training programmes for SENCOs and other staff, "let's talk more" programmes, a catch all approach to screening and checking children's development and applying a multi-agency approach to family challenges.

Schools

You noted the difficulty that Devon is experiencing in meeting the requirements of the national funding formula. In your view, this is impacting negatively on schools, but particularly in areas of high need. Within this context, we considered achievement against all key stages. You were disappointed with your rankings at all key stages which have generally declined. This notwithstanding, your phonics scores, are, at 84%, two percentage points above national average. Reading and writing at key stage 1 are 1% above national average and mathematics is in-line with the national average. Pupils entitled to free school meals performed below the national average in reading, writing and mathematics, a disappointing drop from 2017.

At key stage 2, with the exception of reading, pupils performed just below national average, with disadvantaged pupils showing a bigger drop because FSM outcomes have improved at national level. In reading, pupils overall attained just above the national average.

At key stage 4, you noted that data shows improvement, but not in-line with that seen nationally. However, girls are doing better than boys and, indeed, better than girls nationally. We discussed analysis that you have undertaken to explore a dip at key stage 4 that is not following the national trend of improvement. You advanced the explanation that the majority of the 2018 cohort is made up white British boys, who seem to have the lowest rates of achievement, and that schools contain the majority of such pupils are also, because of funding issues, increasing reducing pastoral and teaching assistant support.

At key stage 5 we noted a dip in performance in line with national, but noted that Devon's performance is better than statistical neighbours and is in line with regional averages. Again, girls are performing better than boys.

We discussed a number of general challenges for Devon. You are concerned that key stage 3 continues to be neglected within secondary schools. You noted also that expectations of white British boys remain too low. Furthermore, you noted your reservations about the attitudes of some secondary headteachers towards the governments aspiration that 75% of pupils should be studying the EBacc subject combination. I welcomed your challenge to secondary headteachers on each of your three issues. You underlined the ongoing challenges of Devon's leadership role across the mixed school estate, pointing out clear examples of impact where the authority is able to intervene. We discussed a number of schools. You classified Ilfracombe Academy, Bideford College and Pilton Community College as schools that are coasting. Similarly, you cited low standards at Atlantic Academy (formerly Route 39), Bideford College, Holsworthy Community College, Pilton Community College, St Luke's Science and Sports College and Steiner Academy Exeter. We noted your speedy intervention to secure the safety of children at Steiner Academy Exeter in October 2018.

Finally, we discussed numbers of children in elective home education across the county which have risen from 766 in 2015 to 1,588 in 2018. We noted that you did not have concerns about Dartmouth Academy, ISCA, QECC and Teignmouth where you feel the high levels of pupil movement were due to the international students White Guardians programme rather than any form of off-rolling. However

you shared that for 17/18, pupil movement figures appear to be rising at South Dartmoor, Bideford College and Pilton Community College.

In conclusion, I thanked you for your realistic self-evaluation across your social care and education functions. I was pleased to note the very clear shift in your aspirations for secondary education in the county and the challenge that you are bringing to colleagues across the county on behalf of your most vulnerable children.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bradley Simmons". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

Bradley Simmons HMI
Regional Director South West