



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

Ministry of Housing
Communities & Local Government
Fry Building
London SW1P 4DF



Department
for Education

Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
London SW1P 3BT

Councillor Matt Golby
Leader
Northamptonshire County Council
One Angel Square
Angel Street
Northampton NN1 1ED

13 November 2018

Dear Matt,

We are writing to inform Northamptonshire County Council of the Government's response to the letter of 2 November from the lead Commissioner for Northamptonshire, Tony McArdle, in which he requests additional capacity on children's services for the Commissioner team.

Keeping vulnerable children safe is one of the most important duties that local authorities carry out. As you will know, the Department for Education intervened in Northamptonshire's children's services from 2013 to 2016, following inspections of services for children, which were found to be 'inadequate' overall by Ofsted. The County worked closely with the Department to put in place a plan of action to improve services, and was deemed by Ofsted to have improved services to 'requires improvement' by 2016.

However, the findings of Ofsted's focussed visit letter of 13 November 2018 are concerning. Ofsted looked at Northamptonshire's arrangements for managing contacts and referrals in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and thresholds for children in need of help and protection, and found that services have significantly deteriorated since inspection in 2016. Ofsted has issued the authority with two areas for priority action around workforce capacity and the allocation and progression of cases. It must now be the priority of the children's services leadership team to respond to those actions and quickly stabilise services, so that there is no further deterioration in performance and sustainable improvements can be made.

The Secretary of State for Education has carefully considered Ofsted's findings, the history of performance and intervention into Northamptonshire's children's services, and the letter from the lead Commissioner. On that basis, in addition to those Commissioners appointed by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, he is considering exercising his powers under section 497a (4b) of the Education Act 1996. He is minded to appoint a Children's Services Commissioner, who would provide immediate support to stabilise and improve Northamptonshire's children's services – working with your Partner in Practice improvement advisers, Lincolnshire County Council. He would also join the Commissioner team in considering how best to deliver children's services in Northamptonshire, should the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government decide to implement a proposal for reorganisation of local government in Northamptonshire.

The Children's Services Commissioner would be appointed on a non-executive basis and have a remit to issue any necessary instructions to the authority to secure adequate performance in children's services. However, the operational and strategic accountability for the delivery of these services would remain with Northamptonshire County Council until any future decision by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on local government reorganisation in Northamptonshire is implemented.

We would also see a role for the Children's Services Commissioner in bringing together the views of all parties about the future delivery of Northamptonshire's children's services should local government be reorganised in Northamptonshire. We hope that this would help the council to build on discussions already taking place locally on this question. We are clear that decisions here should not just be about managing spend – although it is important that services deliver value for money and are sustainable. They should also be an opportunity to re-engage and re-energise local partnerships, rebuild the capacity and culture of children's services, and think creatively about the services that residents of Northamptonshire need for the future.

We hope that the Council will welcome the appointment of a Children's Services Commissioner, and the additional capacity and expertise this would bring. We would expect the Council to work closely with the Children's Services Commissioner to decide the best way of delivering children's services in Northamptonshire in the future. Officials will shortly share with the Council a draft statutory Direction, setting out the proposed terms of reference for the Commissioner and the Council will be invited to make any representations before a final decision is made.

We consider that Malcolm Newsam CBE is an excellent candidate to carry out this role. Malcolm is an experienced director of children's services, and has worked with a number of local authorities and government to drive improvement as well as to oversee the transition to new delivery models.

We are copying this letter to Victoria Perry, Tony McArdle, Brian Roberts, Theresa Grant, Debbie Barnes CBE, Malcolm Newsam CBE and to local MPs, and will make a copy available on gov.uk.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'James Brokenshire'.

Rt Hon James Brokenshire MP
Secretary of State for Housing,
Communities and Local Government

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Damian Hinds'.

Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP
Secretary of State for Education