



Vicky Ford MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

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Councillor Paul Marshall
Leader of West Sussex County Council
County Hall
West Street
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8th December 2020

Dear Cllr Marshall

WEST SUSSEX CHILDREN'S SERVICES

I am writing following the report of the Commissioner for Children's Services in West Sussex.

I was pleased to read the Commissioner's report, which sets out the progress being made to improve children's social care services in West Sussex.

The Commissioner's report brings together new evidence of the Council's capacity and capability to improve. I am encouraged that there is now a new political leadership in respect of children's services, supported by strong senior executive appointments, including a new director of children's services. This has undoubtedly been strengthened by the wider work the Council is undertaking to reform the corporate Council, with the support of its corporate improvement partner, East Sussex County Council. The strength of this partnership will evidently be important in creating the conditions in which children's services can continue to improve.

I have looked carefully at the most recent evidence of children's services performance in West Sussex, including the letter from Ofsted following its focussed visit carried out in October. Ofsted's letter demonstrates a shift in culture and that the building blocks for improvement are being put in place. I am reassured too that the authority has worked well to manage the impact of responding to COVID-19, while keeping focus on children's social care. But, it is clear that there is still much work to do to address the weaknesses identified in 2019, and bring the standard of service up to the quality that children and families in West Sussex deserve. I

understand that you met with my officials to discuss the Commissioner's report, and that this meeting has been helpful in providing assurances about steps the Council is taking in response to Ofsted's findings.

While I want to acknowledge, rightly, the progress that you are making, I am not yet convinced that the evidence is yet sufficiently secure to demonstrate a lasting impact on outcomes for children and families in West Sussex. With that in mind, I intend to issue a new Direction to the Council, under section 497A (4B) of the 1996 Education Act, which will require the local authority to work with the Commissioner over the year ahead to consolidate and build on these improvements. The authority's children's services will remain subject to the Department's intervention regime, and I will receive regular updates from the Commissioner about progress. An important part of this Direction is that the Commissioner will make a recommendation to me, at the end of the period, as to whether progress has been strong enough to support children's services remaining under the control of the Council. There therefore needs to be, over the next twelve months, real determination, effort and energy put into achieving the Council's improvement plan and demonstrating a tangible and lasting impact on social work practice and outcomes. For that reason, I have agreed that work to develop the Trust should be paused to allow the Council to focus on achieving these aims and will re-assess at that time whether the Trust remains appropriate. I have not come to this decision lightly. If, at any time, new evidence comes to light that shows that the quality of services is deteriorating, or that children are unsafe, then I may consider again whether services should be removed from the Council.

While there is still more work to do to ensure that all children in West Sussex receive a consistently good service, I am encouraged by the positive progress made, and I hope you can build on this in the year ahead. Elected members, senior leaders, partners and children's services staff all have a role to play to demonstrate that real improvements can be achieved, and it is vital that these improvements are sustained and continue into the future.

Alongside the statutory direction, I am publishing the Commissioner's report and my letter to you. I am copying this letter to Councillor Jacquie Russell, Lead Member for Children in West Sussex; Becky Shaw, Chief Executive of West Sussex County Council; Lucy Butler, Director of Children's Services for West Sussex County Council, and John Coughlan CBE, Commissioner for Children's Services in West Sussex.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Vicky Ford". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small flourish at the end.

Vicky Ford MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families