



Edward Timpson MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families

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Councillor Sir Albert Bore
Leader of the Council
Birmingham City Council
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29 November 2013

Den Albert,

I wrote to you on 3 September, expressing my serious concerns about the continuing poor quality of children's services in Birmingham. I said that those concerns had, if anything, sharpened over the previous few months and there was an urgent need to stabilise the service and make it safer for children and young people in Birmingham. Alongside that a significant and sustained programme of improvement would be needed into the medium term. I said at that point, that I intended to ask Ofsted to undertake an inspection of progress this month. I am now writing to update you on my plans.

My officials have been working closely with your officers over the past few months. That work has taken place against the backdrop of a clear understanding that Birmingham's services continue to be inadequate. I think Peter Hay's public acknowledgement of that has been helpful and important. He has advised my officials that significant work has been set in train to stabilise the immediate risks in the service and that you are considering options, including some quite far reaching ones, for how the service might be delivered in future.

In the light of all of that, while my overall concerns about the quality of the service, of course, remain, I have concluded that a slightly different approach is needed from that envisaged in September. In short, rather than ask Ofsted to make an inspection of progress, I have asked for a clear report advising me on the Council's plans for change, considering whether they are sufficient, what alternatives might be appropriate and what decisions I may need to take to ensure that the right action is taken.

I want that advice to be informed by independent views. I have therefore asked Julian Le Grand (Professor of Social Policy at the LSE) to lead a team with Alan

Wood (DCS in Hackney) and the Chief Social Worker, Isabelle Trowler, to form a clear view on these issues and report back to me and the Secretary of State. In doing so, I would expect them to involve other leading practitioners in the children's social care sector (including Directors of Children's Services leading innovative practice elsewhere in the country) and my officials.

As part of their work, having early access to the report of the proposed LGA peer review of safeguarding as soon as it is provided to you would be helpful.

I have therefore asked Julian, Alan and Isabelle to:

- assess the Council's plans and the options you are considering for securing and sustaining the necessary improvements in services;
- consider and test the Council's assessment of the current situation within children's social care, recent progress and capacity to drive sustainable improvement; and
- advise me on (a) the viability of the options you propose and the approaches and structures most likely to support sustained improvement, (b) any alternative options that they may consider appropriate; and (c) any DfE action needed to ensure improvement takes place.

While we no longer intend to ask Ofsted to undertake a specific inspection in Birmingham, it is, of course, a matter for the Chief Inspector when Ofsted inspects Birmingham's services as part of their new programme of child protection and children in care inspections. I would, in addition, want Julian, Alan and Isabelle to alert Ofsted if they identify any new and serious concerns.

We have spoken and I know you welcome the support and challenge to your emerging plans that this approach entails. I know too that you will want to ensure your full participation and that of your officers in the team's work. Their advice to me will, of course, be available to you too and we will put it into the public domain.

In the light of that advice, I will want to discuss next steps with you. I should be clear, not least in the light of media speculation earlier this month, that no decisions have been taken about the action we will take following this advice. Nor do I have a pre-determined view of the right next steps. I will, of course, be looking for the solutions which best meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people in Birmingham.

Yours sincerely,

Edward

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Copy to: Peter Hay, Jacqui Jensen, Stephen Hughes and Brigid Jones.