

Andrew Christie CBE

Children' Services Commissioner
for North Northamptonshire and
West Northamptonshire

November 2021

Dear Minister Quince

In September I wrote to the previous Minister updating her on the progress of the children's social care intervention in West Northamptonshire and North Northamptonshire. At that time I advised that with Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) delivering increasingly effective services on behalf of both councils it was time to end my commissioner role and move to a less intensive intervention regime.

I know that the leader of North Northamptonshire also wrote to Minister Ford – and subsequently to you – to say he would welcome ongoing expert support and assurance. Rather than repeat my reasoning I have attached my September letter to this one, but I have also taken advantage of your appointment as Minister to revisit my advice.

Since September I am happy that the NCT team continue to work hard to improve services. The trust senior leadership team is stable, competent and is a significant strengthening of capacity compared with that in place prior to the establishment of the trust. I should highlight the recent Ofsted inspection of the trust's fostering function which found an improvement from 2019's *inadequate* judgement to *requires improvement*. Requires improvement means what it says, and there is more work to do, as the trust recognises. Fixing the failings of an inadequate service necessarily takes time, and the legacy of poor work and poor decisions in the past will unfortunately be with us and our young people for some time. Nonetheless, the inspection noted a number of strengths and recognised NCT's improvement and work to improve still further. I see this as tangible evidence that children and families in both unitary councils are now receiving a better service than they did under the old county council.

It was troubling, then, that initially there seems to have been some lack of understanding of the progress illustrated by this inspection outcome. The councils should, of course, challenge the trust on its performance but I am concerned that there should be realistic expectations of the pace at which both this area and the service as a whole will be turned round -particularly with a full service inspection expected next year. In the run-up to and aftermath of that inspection the trust will need the full and pragmatic support of all its partners, in particular the two councils. I have explained to both councils my own view that a *requires improvement* judgement for the service as a whole next year – an outcome I am hopeful of – would represent a huge step forward from the dysfunction revealed in the 2019 inspection of the old county council. We all aspire to more, but this outcome would be a signature success for both the new councils and the trust that serves them.

I think this is now accepted and recognised by the two councils. I also think it is now accepted by the two councils that the trust is making expected progress and that it deserves and needs the full support of both councils. I believe that the two councils are now also clear about their responsibilities; and the contribution they must make to complement the work of the trust in improving standards. That contribution includes the right children's services system leadership, good corporate parenting, well led safeguarding partnership arrangements and well performing educational services for vulnerable children.

Another recent development I wish to raise also turns on this question of realistic expectations. The trust and commissioning councils are currently in the process of settling the business plan and associated budget for the coming year. Like any service, NCT has a responsibility to deliver value for money in its services. Better services tend to also be more efficient – the reasons are complex but as a simple illustration better management of placements and better work to avoid their need reduce budget pressures, as does lower reliance on agency staff. Of course, the opposite is true in underperforming services seeking to improve, a fact recognised in the welcome decision to commit additional funds to children's social care in Northamptonshire over the last two financial years. As the trust's customers the councils should rightly challenge on efficiency, but I have encouraged them to do so with a realistic understanding of the timescales involved. It is for the trust and councils, rather than the commissioner and DfE, to agree an appropriate budget. That is likely to involve commitments to ongoing savings – I know it does in similar exercises I am involved in elsewhere – but the timescale over which they can realistically be achieved given the historic underperformance of Northamptonshire County Council needs to be acknowledged in these discussions.

I am hopeful on both counts that this is simply a question of three new organisations (the trust and the two unitary councils) developing a shared language and understanding of the task they all share on behalf of the children and young people of the two authorities. It is obviously in everyone's interests that the trust should continue the improvement secured in the past year.

Finally, I should mention the recent news that the DCS working on behalf of both unitary councils intends to move on to a new authority. Finding the right replacement arrangements will be a key task for both councils given the vital role the DCS plays in any improvement programme. However, the fact that the trust is operating well with its own stable senior leadership team mitigates the risk that the changes to the DCS arrangements might disrupt the improvement programme.

Given the progress secured and trajectory the service is on, I still believe that a continuing commissioner presence with the statutory powers entailed is more than is necessary as things stand. In fact, I believe it is important that trust and councils should take increasing responsibility for their work as the DfE intervention progresses. I previously suggested that a replacement for me

as chair of the improvement board should be an appointment by the councils as part of that move towards greater ownership. In light of the points I raise above I am minded to revise that advice and say that it would be more helpful if that role was taken on by someone appointed directly by, and accountable to, you as the children's minister. An appointee close to developments on the ground but independent of local parties would be in a good position to reassure you about trust performance and help the councils understand the support it needs to maintain improvement. I would suggest the councils and their partners might ask this individual to chair the local safeguarding partnership.

I have shared this revised position with all parties and believe it has their backing. The commissioning councils in particular have assured me they recognise the importance of their constructive support for the trust as it works towards the expected inspection next year. I feel the suggested approach gives reassurance to both you and the councils while supporting a transition to a less directive phase of the intervention. If you agree my advice I will, of course, continue to represent your interests in the intervention while an appointment is made and would be happy to support in identifying a candidate – hopefully to take on the role early in the new year.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Christie CBE