



# Education Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

Tel: 020 7219 2370 Fax 020 7219 2370 Email: [educom@parliament.uk](mailto:educom@parliament.uk)

Website: [www.parliament.uk/education-committee](http://www.parliament.uk/education-committee) Twitter: [@CommonsEd](https://twitter.com/ CommonsEd)

From Robert Halfon MP, Chair

The Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP  
Secretary of State for Education  
Department for Education  
20 Great Smith Street  
London  
SW1P 3BT  
Via email

26 September 2022

Dear Kit,

## **Re: Education Committee's oral evidence session on the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson**

I am writing to highlight the serious concerns that our Committee has with the current leadership of Solihull and Bradford Councils, following a recent [accountability hearing](#) we held regarding the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson in 2020.

Following the publication of [the National Review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson](#), our Committee invited Annie Hudson, the Chair of the Child Safeguarding Review Panel, to appear before us to outline the failings that the Panel identified as being made by local safeguarding agencies, and to provide an overview of the recommendations made to local agencies and Government following these tragic murders. We also invited the Chief Executive (Nick Page) and Interim Director of Children's Services (Tim Browne) at Solihull Council to attend the session, and the Chief Executive (Kersten England) and Interim Director of Children's Services (Mariam Haque) at Bradford Council.

We had hoped that these local authority representatives would provide us with an explanation of why major failings were made by both Council's Children's Services in the cases of Arthur and Star and provide us with evidence and reassurance that those failings will never happen again. Unfortunately, we found the responses from both councils inadequate, leaving us extremely concerned as to whether the current leadership of Solihull and Bradford Councils will be able to safeguard other vulnerable children.

We outline our main concerns below, including wider concerns we have with regards to the National Review:

### **Leadership at Solihull Council and Bradford Councils**

Several Members of the Committee felt that both Chief Executives failed to take accountability for the mistakes made by the respective Council's they lead. Nick Page and Kersten England have been Chief Executives of their respective Councils

for a substantial period of time – Mr Page from 2014 and Ms England from 2015. Since their appointments, Children’s Services in both local authorities have significantly declined.

In Solihull, Children’s Services was rated as ‘Requires Improvement’ by Ofsted in its last two inspections (2016 and 2019), with its 2019 inspection noting that “in some instances, cases were closed without sufficient information being gathered”. In February this year, Solihull was issued with an Improvement Notice following ongoing concerns around weaknesses in part of its Children’s Services.

*In Bradford, Children’s Services was rated as ‘Inadequate’ by Ofsted in 2018. In particular, Ofsted noted that Children’s Services had “rapidly deteriorated” since its last inspection. Following this inspection, the Department for Education issued Bradford Council with an “Improvement Notice” and an Improvement Advisor was appointed. In January 2022, the Children’s Services Commissioner concluded that “control of children’s services be removed from the Council for a period and an alternative delivery model developed”. As you will know, work is now underway to develop a Trust which will run services for vulnerable children and families in Bradford.*

Tragically, during the decline of Children’s Services in both Bradford and Solihull, Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson were murdered. This was despite wider family members expressing concerns about both children to Children’s Services and key opportunities for all agencies involved to examine obvious signs that both children were suffering substantial abuse.

Whilst the Directors of both Bradford and Solihull’s Children’s Services at the time of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson’s deaths have resigned, the Chief Executives have continued in their roles. This is despite the catastrophic errors of judgement that were made in these cases, and the decline in services more generally.

When we took oral evidence from them, there were several things said by both Mr Page and Ms England which led us to question whether they are best placed to continue to lead and oversee the state of Children’s Services in both authorities, and to tackle the significant challenges required to improve both authorities. In particular:

- It is unclear what both Chief Executives are doing to stabilise and improve Children’s Services in both local authorities. When we asked what they were doing in this respect, Kersten England told us that what is critical is “stability of the workforce”. Nick Page told us that: “I still believe I have the opportunity and the wherewithal to carry on improving the services for children and young people”. However, we were given little information on what specific steps they as the leaders are taking to turn things around.
- In the cases of Arthur and Star, not enough sufficient information was sought by those responsible for investigating their situations. Too much information was taken at face value of what the parents were saying, and not enough was given to Arthur and Star.

- Solihull Council would allow the staff members involved in the case of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes to return to their roles. It was not clear what support or additional training they would be given to ensure future errors were avoided.
- When we asked for a timeline of when both Councils will have turned around Children's Services, Kersten England committed to a year and Nick Page told us to expect "clear signs of improvement within the next 10 to 12 months." He explained that he expects Ofsted "to come back in and probably find us inadequate" but that in two years he expects Children's Services in Solihull to get a 'good' Ofsted rating.

Both Chief Executives are paid significant tax-payer funded salaries to lead and improve these councils. The demise of both Children's Services and significant failures made in the cases of Arthur and Star suggests they are failing, and for that, there must be accountability. It is our view that the Department for Education and Ofsted should assess the progress being made on the improvements to Children's Services in Solihull and Bradford Council, within the timeframes outlined above. If those improvements have not been made, consideration should be given to whether both Chief Executives are capable of continuing to try and establish such significant change.

### **National Review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson**

We also have concerns that the National Panel, Chaired by Annie Hudson, did not satisfactorily identify or call out the failings of Bradford and Solihull Councils. When we asked Ms Hudson whether progress on improving Children's Services in each authority was happening quick enough, and whether her recommendations would be enacted at a local level, she said:

*[[It is important to remember that this is about the three statutory agencies and their joint shared responsibility. The process of working with Bradford and Solihull and the partners—it is important to remember that this is about the three statutory agencies and their joint and shared responsibility—is that we had very constructive and open conversations and dialogue with people throughout the organisation: practitioners, managers, leaders, political and professional. I think it has been a difficult process, inevitably. The work of unpacking what happened around these two children and how it reflected, in some respects, wider problems has been very difficult and challenging for them. The decision that Bradford has made with the Department for Education to establish a children's trust provides an opportunity that I am confident they will take and are taking.*

Whilst we recognise that other agencies were responsible for some of the failings in the case of Star and Arthur, the state of Solihull and Bradford Council's Children's Services, and the slow progress of improving these, is something that the Chair of the Child Safeguarding Review Panel should be concerned about. If improvements had been made sooner, it could potentially have saved the lives of two young children.

Furthermore, whilst the Review recommends “a new expert-led, multi-agency model for child protection investigation, planning, intervention and review”, we are concerned that joint decision making and joint accountability in both the existing Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) system and the recommendation set out above means that no one person is responsible for any given decision or held to account. This is evident in the cases of Star and Arthur.

We recognise the ongoing pressures and challenges many social workers are under and we appreciate and value their hard work. However, we feel it is important to raise these concerns with you as Secretary of State for Education, so that tragic cases like Arthur and Star do not happen again.

I have cc'd this letter to both the Chief Executives and Interim Directors of Children's Services at Solihull and Bradford Councils. I have also cc'd the Chair of the Child Safeguarding Review Panel.

We look forward to your response,

A handwritten signature in grey ink that reads "Robert Halfon". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Robert Halfon MP**  
**Chair of the Education Committee**