



**The Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP**  
Secretary of State

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Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP  
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// October 2022

Thank you for your letter dated 27 September 2022, outlining your concerns after the Education Committee's oral evidence session on the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson.

I, too, share these concerns around Solihull and Bradford. I want to make it clear that failure to deliver a high-quality children's social care service is unacceptable and that all children in this country deserve the very best of care. The tragic events leading up to the deaths of both Arthur and Star should not be allowed to happen again and my department takes our role in this incredibly seriously. The Government will not hesitate to hold local leaders to account in order to keep children safe.

I am clear that we must intervene quickly and decisively when local authority (LA) failure is identified. I have a range of intervention measures that my team can use which escalate in intensity. These start off collaboratively and include activities such as the use of sector-led improvement partners and expert improvement advisors that can focus on discrete areas of weakness. If improvement is slow then we can escalate up to the use of a Statutory Direction to enforce activity, the deployment of a commissioner to assess whether services need to be removed from Council control and, in the most extreme cases, the setting up of a Trust to deliver services on the Councils behalf.

I share your concerns around the ability of Solihull to deliver a safe service to children in need of help and protection. My department has

intervened over the past 9 months to better understand the scale of the problems faced and how we can best ensure substantial and sustainable improvement. As you note in your letter, my department has taken a range of steps including appointing an experienced improvement advisor to work closely with the LA on a detailed and measurable improvement plan and we provided immediate funding to address concerns around high levels of unmanaged risk.

We issued an Improvement Notice to Solihull which included a clause that should ministers not be satisfied with progress made, then further escalation would be needed. A formal review recently took place with the Chief Executive, interim Director of Children's Services, Leader of the Council and Lead Member. Unfortunately, my team and I remain unconvinced that sufficient improvement had been made. I am now minded to issue a Statutory Direction and deploy a commissioner to instruct the Council as to how to improve the children's social care functions, allowing 14 days for the Council to make representation.

In Bradford, we recognised that improvement progress was slow and so in September 2021 my department escalated our intervention and appointed an expert commissioner to review whether the Council had the capacity and capability to improve itself and retain control of Children's Social Care Services. In January 2022, the Commissioner recommended that control of Children's Social Care Services should be removed from the Council and an alternative delivery model developed. Following the recommendation that the Council needs support to improve, Bradford's children social care services are being lifted into a Trust. Bradford Council have agreed to establish the new Trust, which will bring positive change and independent oversight to drive rapid improvement. This model has been deployed in several local areas to good effect, including most recently in Sunderland which improved from Inadequate to Outstanding in three years. We are now working towards the establishment of the Trust and have appointed a Chair (Eileen Milner) and strong interim executive team. The team are seeking to create the Trust as quickly and safely as possible, and we expect it to officially launch on 1 April 2023.

Recognising the time it takes to set up a Trust, our commissioner continues to support and challenge the delivery of an ambitious improvement plan in Bradford to bring about a fundamental shift in how children's social care services will be delivered. Improvement activity includes tackling core issues around workforce stability, implementing a new delivery model for initial referral assessment at the Front Door and the recruitment of a new Assistant Director for Improvement to drive pace of change. Bradford is also working with an experienced Sector-Led Improvement Partner (Leeds) and we have provided funding for an

ambitious programme that will train an additional 70 social workers to bolster capacity.

More broadly, the role of the Chief Executive, and the support they have from the Council, is fundamental to the smooth running of any LA. We are committed to ensuring that Councillors take on a leadership role within children's social care, both in their role as corporate parents but also within Council scrutiny panels. Additional training, paid for by my department and delivered by the Local Government Association (LGA) has been provided to over a third of LAs across the country. The LGA have delivered some form of intensive leadership support to 81 councils since the start of their contract and have engaged with all councils through their participation in some form of learning and development.

My department and I will continue to work collaboratively with our partners in government, such as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that LA services are delivered to the expected standards. We will also continue to work within the sector to ensure we are focusing our efforts on reducing failure wherever we find it and delivering a good service for our most vulnerable members of society. Our work is proving effective; the number of Inadequate LAs has reduced from 30 to 17 and the number of Good and Outstanding has increased from 54 to 82 since 2017.

But we want to go further and are currently examining options for how we can continue to improve our safeguarding system. Government has set out its ambition to deliver an ambitious and comprehensive implementation strategy before the end of 2022, which will take into account recommendations from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, National Review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson and the Competition Market Authority study into children's social care provision.

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel is a statutory and independent expert committee set up to identify, commission and oversee reviews of serious child safeguarding cases. The recommendations made in their national reviews are independent, for consideration by Ministers and other relevant parties. The Panel was tasked to review what happened to Arthur and Star to understand what can be learned and what steps might be taken to avoid other tragedies. The review was focussed on the practice of all agencies and professionals who came into contact with Arthur and Star. It is not the role of the Panel to investigate the performance of LAs.

The national review puts forward several local and national recommendations to improve the child protection system. The Government will not hesitate to hold local leaders to account, and are considering the Panel recommendations as part of wider reforms to Children's social care and the strengthening of Child Protection measures. Due to the independent nature of the Panel, we will ensure that Annie Hudson (Panel chair) receives a copy of this letter and responds to you directly

I thank you for taking the time to share your concerns with me and hope that this letter has reassured you that we are taking this matter seriously.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Kit Malthouse', with a large initial 'K' and a stylized 'M'.

**The Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP**  
**Secretary of State for Education**