Leicester City Council's Children's Services Journey to Excellence: One year on from the Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Services (ILACS)

For discussion

Date of meeting: 6 December 2022

Lead director/officer: Martin Samuels

Useful information

■ Ward(s) affected: All

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■ Report version number: 1

1. Summary

- 1.1. A full inspection of Leicester City Council's Children's Services by Ofsted in autumn 2021 determined the services to be 'good'.
- 1.2. As part of the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework, the council can now expect further inspection activity in line with the process for good and outstanding authorities.
- 1.3. Under this framework an annual engagement meeting was held with Ofsted in March 2022 covering children's social care and early help as well as SEND and education. Following on from this meeting, as is normal practice, Ofsted sent a formal letter summarising the discussion.
- 1.4. It was anticipated that the next steps for Leicester City Council would be a Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) or a focused visit. A JTAI was due to begin in September 2022 but was called off at the last minute due to sickness in the inspection team. It is anticipated that a focused visit will now be undertaken in the fairly near future. A further ILACS inspection is not anticipated before late 2024.
- 1.5. Following on from the full inspection under the ILACS framework in autumn 2021, Leicester City Council's Children's Services have begun to drive towards achieving excellence in line with the vision developed in the divisional three year plans.
- 1.6. Key activities to support this journey to excellence include, engagement as part of the Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliance, the development of an independently-chaired Excellence Board and the creation of a 'check and challenge' relationship with North Tyneside Council.

2. Recommended actions/decision

- 2.1. To understand the anticipated next steps under Ofsted's ILACS framework and note the discussion as part of the annual engagement meeting.
- 2.2. To recognise the steps being taken to progress on the journey to excellence.

3. Scrutiny / stakeholder engagement

4. Background

4.1. ILACS inspection process

- 4.1.1. Leicester City Council's Children's Services were rated as 'good' by Ofsted in autumn 2021 following a full inspection under the ILACS framework. As a 'good' authority, we can now expect the following in the ongoing inspection process:
 - Annual engagement meeting
 - Shared self-evaluation
 - Short inspection (once in a three year period)
 - Usually one focused visit in between inspections
 - Possible JTAI (would replace a focused visit)

5. Detailed report

5.1. Annual engagement meeting

- 5.1.1. In spring 2022 an annual engagement meeting was held with representatives from Ofsted to discuss developments in children's services in Leicester.
- 5.1.2. The annual engagement meeting is an opportunity for senior officers from the local authority and senior colleagues from Ofsted to get a shared sense of the current situation and issues at that local authority. Under the ILACS framework it is expected these annual engagement meetings will help gain an accurate picture of performance and progress, identify any issues early on and plan inspection activity. The meeting is informed by Ofsted's reading of the local authority's self-evaluation which is shared in advance of the conversation.
- 5.1.3. The main themes from the discussion are summarised in the brief letter which Ofsted shared following the meeting. This is available for review in full in Appendix 1. The letter outlines the discussion relating to the local authority context, self-evaluation, early help, help and protection, children looked after, education and future inspection activity.
- 5.1.4. During the annual engagement meeting Ofsted were made aware of Leicester's concerns about financial pressures, social work staffing and placement sufficiency. In relation to education, concerns were shared with Ofsted with regards to the impact of COVID on the wellbeing of school staff and on children's learning during lockdowns.
- 5.1.5. In the conversation there was some discussion of the requirement for a post-inspection action plan. Ahead of the annual conversation a submission had been made to Ofsted to highlight where the SEF had been updated to capture the actions required following the full standard inspection in autumn 2021 and to detail that no separate action plan for monitoring recommendations had been created. Instead, explanation was offered that the actions form part of the service plans that align to the departmental three-year improvement plan. However, during the conversation it was made clear that a specific improvement plan to address the areas for improvement was required. Following the conversation, a plan was shaped and shared with Ofsted.

5.2. Next steps in inspection process

- 5.2.1. In the annual engagement meeting it was noted that normally Ofsted will start considering a focused visit or JTAI twelve months after a full inspection. An outline of what these inspection activities entail is provided below:
- 5.2.2. JTAIs: Joint targeted area inspections of local area arrangements and services for children in need of help and protection. These inspections are undertaken by Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Service (HMICFRS) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMI Probation). Two weeks' notice will be given for a team of eleven inspectors carrying out a week of fieldwork. From April 2022 the inspectorates have been carrying out two types of JTAI, one evaluating the multi-agency response to identification of initial need and risk (the front door of child protection) and one looking at the multi-agency response to the criminal exploitation of children.
- 5.2.3. On 5 September 2022 notification was given of a JTAI inspection with focus on the multi-agency response to the identification of initial need and risk. Inspectors were due be on site from 19 to 23 September. In the event, the inspection did not go ahead, due to sickness in the inspection team. Brief views were given by Ofsted, based on the preliminary assessment of cases. The local system partners provided brief rapid feedback on a small number of case issues and flagged several improvement actions that we had identified during preparation for the inspection. Ofsted were clear that, because the JTAI had not been delivered, there was no formal requirement for any further reporting or action planning by the Leicester system.
- 5.2.4. Focused visits: five working days' notice will be given for a team of two inspectors carrying out two days of fieldwork. A focused visit will look at one or more aspects of the service, themes or cohorts of children. The topic is usually either something that has been identified as good or outstanding practice, an area where themes, trends and issues are identified, an area that will support the local authority's improvement journey, or something that feeds into part of an overarching thematic overview. Topics may include: the front door, children in need or subject to a protection plan, protection of vulnerable children from extra-familial risk, children in care, planning and achieving permanence, care leavers, children placed in unregulated and unregistered settings.
- 5.2.5. Given that the JTAI could not be taken forward as intended, it is expected that Leicester will instead be subject to a focused visit at some point over the next few months. Active preparations are in hand, both to address areas for improvement that were noted during the preliminary stages of the JTAI and to ensure that we are ready for the full scrutiny of the Ofsted inspectors.

5.3. Activity supporting our journey to excellence

5.3.1. While continuing to be mindful of the ongoing inspection process under the ILACS framework and working to ensure that we are inspection ready, Leicester City Council's Children's Services has shifted from centring thinking around Ofsted gradings to more broadly considering how to achieve excellence for children, young

people and their families. This push for excellence aligns with the vision developed in the divisional three-year plans.

- 5.3.2. To support this journey to excellence there have been a number of key activities carried out of the past twelve months, these include:
 - Engagement as part of a 'triad' of local authorities (with Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire) as part of the Reginal Improvement and Innovation Alliance
 - The establishment of an independently chaired Excellence Board
 - The development of a 'check and challenge' relationship with North Tyneside Council

5.4. Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliance

- 5.4.1. Like all of the local authorities in the region, Leicester City Council is part of the East Midlands Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliance (RIIA). The RIIA seeks to:
 - provide robust support and challenge to diagnose improvement challenges
 - systematically share knowledge about what works across the sector
 - ensure that there is effective brokerage of best practice solutions
- 5.4.2. The RIIA is a long-standing arrangement across the East Midlands but some of the activity had become dormant during the response to the COVID pandemic and some of the regular programme of peer challenge had been put on hold.
- 5.4.3. In 2022 the approach to the peer challenge conversations was refreshed and consultancy support was provided by The Staff College (an organisation that supports the development of leadership and management capacity in local authorities and, through this, contribute to the improvement of locality services for children, young people and families).
- 5.4.4. During the summer Leicester City Council, Lincolnshire County Council and Nottinghamshire County Council were joined in a peer 'triad', supported by consultant Gail Hopper (previously DCS of Rochdale Borough Council).
- 5.4.5. Gail reviewed the self-evaluation and supporting documentation shared by each authority and supported each DCS in agreeing key lines of enquiries to explore as part of a challenge day. Gail then facilitated discussion in the triad before making recommendations about the findings from each challenge and review.
- 5.4.6. During the peer challenge there were strengths identified within Leicester's self-evaluation document (SEF). It was agreed that the SEF was easy to read, clear, confident, relevant and useful. Feedback also noted that the SEF functioned as a powerful demonstration of engagement and reflected a self-awareness based on strong performance data. This represents a particular success for the authority which has historically struggled to find the level of confidence and clarity that is needed to produce a concise document. The SEF was identified as an example of good practice within the region.
- 5.4.7. The peer challenge process also identified strengths in relation to leadership, the participation focus, edge of care, the development of Signs of Safety and the engagement of the statutory Lead Member.

- 5.4.8. The areas for development that were noted for Leicester as part of the peer challenge related to placement sufficiency challenges, audit completion and the ability to demonstrate impact, management oversight and the consistency of practice. Positively, Gail reflected that leaders in Leicester have a strong grip and know their data and that they have a high awareness of the issues identified, with plans already in place to address the concerns.
- 5.4.9. As part of the peer challenge process, Leicester has been able to make suggestions for areas where peer support would be beneficial. The areas identified include:
 - Early help response/prevention for adolescents
 - The exploitation offer
 - Pushing to outstanding
- 5.4.10. As we move into the next phase of the work with the RIIA there will be further opportunities to explore these areas where support is required.

5.5. Excellence Board

- 5.5.1. Prior to the full Ofsted inspection in 2021, Children's Services had an Improvement Board led by independent chair Linda Clegg (ex-DCS at Blackburn with Darwen Council and North West LGA lead for Children). This arrangement provided valuable support in the preparation for inspection and assurance that the services provided were of a good standard.
- 5.5.2. Recognising the benefits of this independent chairing arrangement to bring together key stakeholders across the children's services partnership in Leicester, it has been agreed to refresh the approach and shift from 'making improvements' to a focus on 'achieving excellence'.
- 5.5.3. Agreeing that it would be beneficial to have a new chair to support the new focus, the Department for Education/Local Government Association supported the brokering of a relationship with Jenny Coles (previously Hertfordshire's Director of Children's Services, former president of the Association of Directors of Children's Services, trustee for the WWCSC) who has now been engaged as the independent chair of the Leicester City Children's Excellence Board.
- 5.5.4. The purpose of the Leicester City Children's Excellence Board is to support partners in Leicester to achieve and maintain excellence in their practice and in the outcomes for children, young people and their families (particularly for those children in need of help and protection, including those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities [SEND], children who are looked after, care leavers and those seeking permanence).
- 5.5.5. There are two key areas of focus for the Excellence Board:
 - Challenging stuck issues to ensure there remains a good foundation of getting the basics done well
 - Driving innovation and supporting thinking about how to do things differently to deliver excellent outcomes
- 5.5.6. The board is due to meet for the first time on 14 November 2022 and will include directors from across Childrens' Services at Leicester City Council as well as

senior representatives from the NHS Integrated Commissioning Board, Leicestershire Partnership Trust and Leicestershire Police. The full terms of reference for the board are available to view in appendix 2.

5.6. 'Check and Challenge' with North Tyneside

- 5.6.1. To complement the support offered by Jenny Coles through the independent chairing arrangements of the Excellence Board, a relationship for additional independent 'check and challenge' has been brokered via Stewart Bembridge (Children's Services Regional Improvement Support Lead - East Midlands, for the Department for Education).
- 5.6.2. A number of potential local authorities were suggested and after consideration of the demographics, performance data, Ofsted ratings and published priorities, it was determined that North Tyneside Council offered a good match. This decision was also ratified by Jenny Coles, chair of the Excellence Board.
- 5.6.3. It has been agreed with North Tyneside Council that they will support Leicester through a 'check and challenge' relationship, incorporating elements of coaching/mentoring to help provide assurance and further independent oversight.
- 5.6.4. Three key areas have been identified to focus on with North Tyneside: strengthening practice, SEND/early help and complex/stuck cases. A full outline of the brief to North Tyneside is available in appendix 3.
- 5.6.5. This work with North Tyneside is currently being scheduled.

6. Financial, legal, equalities, climate emergency and other implications

6.1 Financial implications

There are no financial implications arising from this report. Martin Judson, Head of Finance

6.2 Legal implications

There are no direct legal implications arising from the report.

Pretty Patel, Head of Law, Social Care & Safeguarding Tel: 0116 454 1457

6.3 Equalities implications

Children's Services are responsible for protecting and promoting the welfare of children in need in the city and also for ensuring that everyone is in receipt of education.

The report provides an update on the anticipated next steps under Ofsted's ILACS framework and the steps being taken to progress on the journey to excellence. Leicester has larger proportions of younger people compared to England. According to census information, the city has a much higher level of ethnic diversity amongst its children and young people than most other council areas. The Index of Deprivation 2019 showed that Leicester is ranked as the 32nd most deprived out of 151 local authority areas in England, deprivation has an important impact on children's lives and health.

The framework aims not to be dependent on one major single inspection event but to provide insight to Ofsted on the performance and direction of travel for the authority. Delivering effective children's services that champion the needs and improved outcomes for children and young people, should lead to positive impacts for children and young people from across all protected characteristics.

The Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework focuses on the effectiveness of local authority services and arrangements:

- to help and protect children (from across all protected characteristics)
- the experiences and progress of children in care wherever they live, including those children who return home
- the arrangements for permanence for children who are looked after, including adoption
- the experiences and progress of care leavers

They also evaluate:

- the effectiveness of leaders and managers
- the impact they have on the lives of children and young people
- the quality of professional practice

One of the underpinning principles of the inspection is focussing on the things that matter most to children's lives.

Equalities Officer, Surinder Singh Ext 37 4148

6.4 Climate Emergency implications

There are no significant climate emergency implications directly associated with this report. Aidan Davis, Sustainability Officer, Ext 37 2284

6.5 Oth	<u>ner im</u>	plications	(You will	need to	have	considered	other	· imp	olications	<u>in</u>	preparing	ı this
report.	Pleas	se indicate	which o	nes app	oly?)						-	

7. Background information and other par	pers: n	ı/a
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8. Summary of appendices:

Appendix 1: Annual Engagement Meeting letter

Appendix 2: Excellence Board Terms of Reference

Appendix 3: North Tyneside Check and Challenge briefing

- 9. Is this a private report (If so, please indicate the reasons and state why it is not in the public interest to be dealt with publicly)? No
- 10. Is this a "key decision"? If so, why? No

Appendix 1: Annual Engagement Meeting letter

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20 April 2022

Sent by email to: Martin.Samuels@leicester.gov.uk

Martin Samuels
Strategic Director of Social Care and Education
Leicester City Council
City Hall
115 Charles Street
Leicester
LE1 1FZ



Katrina Gueli HMI Regional Director – East

Dear Martin

Annual Engagement Meeting 9 March 2022

Thank you to you and your team for meeting with Nick McMullen SHMI, Simon Hollingsworth SHMI, and me to consider your self-evaluation and to discuss developments in children's services in Leicester.

Local authority context

Your reflected that the ILACS in September 2021 was a positive experience for leaders and staff. You described the process as very helpful and that the outcomes are a validation of several years' hard work. You are clear that this does not mean that work and improvement will stop, but you are entering a new phase. You have stood down your improvement board and are replacing this with an excellence board. You are hopeful that the appointment of a highly experienced chair of this board will soon be confirmed. There have been some changes in your leadership team but, overall, you feel that you have leadership stability. Political support has been consistent, and you reported a strong relationship with the Chief Operating Officer which ensures suitable prioritisation for children's services.

Financial pressures are a concern for you. While children's services are operating within budget, future funding for the whole council is highly challenging. You anticipate that some difficult financial decisions will need to be made, probably after the next council elections in May 2023.

Currently, in common with many authorities, your two biggest challenges are social work staffing and placement sufficiency. You report that it is currently very difficult to source suitable agency workers or recruit experienced social workers. This is leading to some caseloads being higher than you would wish. Delays in processing court proceedings have

also contributed to this, although this should decrease over time as the backlog is worked through. You are experiencing particular difficulties in finding suitable placements for children with more complex needs who require specialist care.

Self-Evaluation

You have updated your self-evaluation following the inspection, and the deliberate shift in tone was noticeable in the document. This reflects your greater confidence in the strengths of your services and development work.

There has been some confusion about the expectations regarding the post-inspection action plan you are required to submit. You accept this, and will arrange for a plan that addresses the areas for improvement to be sent to us.

A strong theme throughout your self-evaluation is your work on participation. You are proud of what you have achieved and confident that children's views and voices are supported by your services. To further develop this, you are working on children's records being written as though direct to the child.

Early Help

You feel you have maintained your investment in early help and see this as essential to having a sustainable service and preventing the need for children to become looked after. You are working on your family hub model to provide a truly integrated 0-19 offer.

Help and Protection

Front door referrals are now roughly back to pre-Covid levels, but you are noticing increased complexity of needs in children being referred. You consider that this reflects, in part, the impact of increased pressures on families during the pandemic.

You described detailed plans to address your areas for improvement, including private fostering, LADO recording and support for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds.

You have not seen any noticeable increase in safeguarding referrals for children missing from school but will remain vigilant in this area, given the emerging national concerns.

Children Looked After

You are planning to expand your in-house residential service as part of your response to placement pressures. At present you have no children under 16 in unregistered provision but do have several older children in such settings. You are confident that your managers have a good understanding of when care is being provided and that all placements are carefully monitored.

You are currently looking after 22 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children with a further 35 receiving care leaver support. You are meeting your quota under the national transfer

scheme but are frustrated that children continue to be placed in hotels by the Home Office when they have been incorrectly age-assessed.

You feel that your approach to supporting care leavers post-21 is now a wellestablished part of your offer. You report that you will also support care leavers who return and request help, and provide sensitive support to care leavers wanting to access their care records.

Future inspection activity

Normally Ofsted will start considering a focused visit or JTAI 12 months after a full inspection. This means your next visit is unlikely to be before September 2022.

Education

We discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools, children and young people in your local authority. You reported that there are gaps in children's learning due to the lockdowns, and described how significant these are for Leicester. In particular, you have identified gaps in younger children's ability to read and in their knowledge of spelling, punctuation and grammar. You also told us that the lockdowns have restricted children's opportunities to benefit from enrichment opportunities, as well as having a negative effect on children's mental health and well-being. You described how you are supporting schools as they address these issues, including in schools' work to fill knowledge gaps.

You are concerned about the negative impact that COVID-19 has had on teachers' and school leaders' well-being. You told us that there are a number of experienced headteachers and leaders who have chosen to leave their schools or the profession this academic year. While schools have managed to replace these leaders, you are concerned at the loss of this knowledge and experience. You discussed the training and support you are providing new leaders to help them fulfil their responsibilities well.

We discussed your work to support pupils with SEND and children who are in the care of the local authority. You told us that you have focused on promoting an inclusive approach to these children's education. This is to ensure that they receive their education in mainstream schools, when this is appropriate. You reported a rise in the number of children who have additional needs and in the number of applications for education, health and care plans. You outlined your work to identify the range of additional needs these pupils have, and to support schools in tailoring their provision to meet these needs. You recognise that there is further work for you to undertake to increase parents' confidence in how mainstream schools can cater for their children's additional needs. To this end, you are pleased with the relationship you have developed with the parent carer forum. You are pleased with the outcome of the area SEND revisit, which took place in May 2021. You feel that this inspection highlighted your ambition for children and young people with SEND.

We discussed elective home education (EHE). You reported that the number of children who are currently being electively home educated has recently begun to drop. You told us how education welfare service professionals have worked closely with those parents and carers who have opted for EHE for their children.

We discussed attendance and exclusions. You reported that attendance is lower than usual, including in special schools. You are concerned at the continued persistent absence of some children who were regularly absent from school before the pandemic. You recognise that some pupils with SEND continue to be absent due to anxieties about COVID-19. You reported a significant increase in exclusions, including permanent exclusions. You recognise the need to assist school leaders in their work to support pupils who are at risk of exclusion, to help them remain in school.

You told us of the work that you are completing with schools to ensure that they understand their responsibilities for any of their pupils who attend alternative provision. You continue to work with schools to ensure that you understand which of their pupils are at any such settings, how well they attend and what provision they are receiving. You told us that you recognise how such provision can be helpful for some pupils to keep them engaged in education. However, you are also concerned at occasions when pupils may receive all of their education at alternative provision, when this may not be in the child's best interests.

Please pass on our thanks to colleagues for their preparation and contributions to the meeting. I look forward to hearing about further developments in Leicester.

Yours sincerely

Katrina Gueli HMI

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Regional Director, East Midlands

Terms of Reference						
Leicester City Children's						
Excellence Board						
Purpose	The purpose of the Leicester City Children's Excellence Board is to support partners in Leicester to achieve and maintain excellence in their practice and in the outcomes for children, young people and their families (particularly for those children in need of help and protection, including those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities [SEND], children who are looked after, care leavers and those seeking permanence). There are two key areas of focus for the Board: 1. Challenging stuck issues to ensure there remains a good					
	foundation of getting the basics done well 2. Driving innovation and supporting thinking about how to do things differently to deliver excellent outcomes					
Governance and Accountability	The Board has close links with the LLR Integrated Care System, and the Leicester SEND Improvement Board, Corporate Parenting Board and Leicester Safeguarding Children Partnership Board.					
Objectives	 The objectives of the Board are to: Challenge strategic partners to deliver and maintain positive change for children and families in Leicester Ensure a consistent narrative across the partnership, reflective of shared philosophies and values Create and maintain momentum to unblock issues, and regularly review progress, value and impact Ensure the achievement and maintenance of excellence is informed by the views of children, young people and front-line practitioners, based on the principles of the Lundy Model 					
Meetings	Full Leicester City Children's Excellence Board meetings led by the chair take place on a quarterly basis over Microsoft Teams. Additionally, in between the chaired sessions there are business focused meetings with all members except the chair to progress actions in readiness for full meetings. These meetings will also take place on Microsoft Teams.					
Independent chair	The Board has an independent chair who provides external challenge and facilitates frank discussion between partners.					

	Name	Organisation	Job role
	Jenny Coles		Independent chair
	Martin Samuels	Leicester City Council	Strategic Director Social Care and Education (DCS)
	Tracie Rees	Leicester City Council	Director SEND and Early Help
	Caroline Tote	Leicester City Council	Director Children's Social Care
	Sue Welford/Sophie Maltby	Leicester City Council	Principal Education Officer
Membership	Jane Pierce	Leicester City Council	Head of Service Planning, Performance and Transformation
	Helen Sheppard	Leicester City Council	Senior Project Manager
	Matt Ditcher	Leicestershire Police	Detective Superintendent – Serious Crime
	Chris West	LLR NHS Integrated Care Board	Deputy Director for Nursing, Quality & Performance
	Helen Thompson	Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust	Director of Families, Young People and Children's and LD Services

Appendix 3: North Tyneside Check and Challenge briefing

North Tyneside will support Leicester through a check and challenge relationship, incorporating elements of coaching/mentoring to help provide assurance to Leicester's Children's Services Senior Management Team on their journey to excellence. This will complement the independent oversight offered through the Excellence Board by Jenny Coles.

Leicester will identify three areas of focus to explore with North Tyneside, also determining the key stakeholders who will need to be party to the discussions on each topic.

Initial suggestions are as follows:

Area	Focus	Leicester reps
Strengthening Practice	 a. Consideration of the Signs of Safety model and the multiagency perspective of use in North Tyneside – how has a success been made of this, how has the partnership role been embedded. A strength-based approach to practice is evidenced, with all partners effectively using Signs of Safety to support children, young people and families. It is evidenced that services we provide recognise and meet the needs of the communities we work with. Practitioners can confidently integrate the principles of strength based and trauma informed practice. b. Families report respectful responsive practice. c. Discussion around management oversight and the development of a QA/learning cycle that engages the whole workforce and not just the layer of senior 	Caroline Tote – Director Children's Social Care and Early Help Rebecca Small – Head of Service Children's Social Work Kate Wells – Head of Service Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Keral Patel – Principal Social Worker
SEND/Early Help	management. Reflection on the links between SEND and early help, how is this structured, what can Leicester learn as we look to change the way our own services are structured.	Caroline Tote – Director Children's Social Care and Early Help Tracie Rees – Director of SEND
Complex/stuck cases	Potential for reflection on innovative approaches to address particular stuck cases and consideration of responses to complexity.	Caroline Tote – Director Children's Social Care and Early Help Rebecca Small – Head of Service Children's Social Work