

## **DfE Improvement Adviser's First Report**

### **Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council**

**October 2022**

#### **Introduction and Background**

1. This is the first report of the DfE improvement intervention at Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council (BCP) following the delivery of an Inadequate Ofsted judgement in the ILACS inspection published in February 2022. That judgement had been preceded by two focussed visits over the period between the forming of the new council in 2019 and this fuller inspection. Those visits had triggered various concerns which had in turn contributed to the introduction of an Improvement Adviser in the period 2020 to 2022.
2. This therefore represents a new intervention commencing in April 2022 and subject to a new Statutory Direction accordingly.
3. Whereas this intervention does not technically involve a commissioner role to imply the structural governance of the service is at immediate issue, the DfE steer has been clear throughout that if progress is not effective in the short term the question of a structural intervention, such as a children's trust, may be brought forward. That position has been consistently shared with BCP.
4. The intervention involves myself as adviser, and particularly involves a sector led improvement partner (SLIP) in the form of a team of service specialists from Hampshire County Council, led by Steve Crocker and Stuart Ashley, the DCS and Deputy DCS from Hampshire.
5. The structure of this first report follows a number of key headings related to the necessary building blocks required to establish and drive forward a sustainable improvement plan. They especially include two critical areas of assessment: the state of the services themselves; and the current corporate (and political) context within which the service operates and the improvements must take place. Inevitably, this report summarises complex and detailed information.

#### **Executive Summary**

6. The overarching picture from this first report is that there are cautious grounds for optimism about the future improvement of the services, although as ever at this stage of the process the pace of progress will be an issue – both with some key stakeholders having unrealistic expectations and the risk that the scale of the long-term work may itself become a cause for delay. There are also a number of substantial barriers to improvement in BCP, several of which are external to the service itself which will need to be confronted with both care and determination.
7. The optimism can be drawn from:

- The “wake-up call” from the ILACS result appears to be focussing collective attention on much needed improvement from a previous position of unfounded confidence in a weak service;
- The newly appointed DCS is settling into post and re-establishing leadership and managerial grip which had been lacking from that position. That is encouraging internal and external colleagues and partners;
- The DCS is now bringing together her leadership team through some strong external appointments who individually appear to understand the mechanics of improvement and the nature of service transformation – that work is on-going and not yet complete;
- The service diagnostics show, relative to comparable failing LAs, some (but only some) good levels and pockets of capacity and self-awareness that bode well as a foundation on which to build
- This assessment appears to be further supported by a recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit.

8. The caution relates to:

- The service is blighted by a range of post-pandemic and childhood poverty critical issues that are threatening the best of children’s services. They include: surging levels of demand; serious variations in the quality of performance and delivery typical of a failing service; a generally stretched wider public sector with reduced levels of supportive capacity for children’s services and resilience for vulnerable children; a crisis of social worker recruitment linked to an over dependence on expensive and less stable agency support; some service specific financial challenges (in the corporate context referenced below) including an inherited c£7 million (minimum) in year pressure.
- There remains a series of significant unresolved issues stemming from LGR in 2019 which conspire against the establishment of a better performing service. They include: the vestiges of identification with the previous LAs, although this is reducing over time; a critical problem about resolving terms and conditions for social workers; an equally critical problem about IT client and finance systems.
- These LGR issues are compounded in turn by some outstanding corporate challenges related to the politics of LGR and a particular approach to transformation which may have its benefits but which appears less well suited to the harsh realities of failing children’s services.
- Finally, the LA has been carrying some significant wider financial challenges, including a potential for a 114 Notice declaring the LA effectively insolvent, which risk destabilising the LA generally and which may militate against the sort of financial support a failing service requires. Very recent corporate progress has been made on these.

9. The case for a children’s trust is not yet made and on balance it should be feasible for the council to lead its service to improvement, especially with the enhanced leadership capacity now establishing. But the various corporate insecurities cannot be ignored and so the trust question cannot be finally discounted, yet.

## **DCS and Leadership Team**

10. The current DCS is the third incumbent in the role since the council was formed through LGR in 2019. In summary (and, with respect to individuals not so far involved in this intervention process, I will offer little detail here), the first substantive DCS took on the task of bringing together three very different LA services (including part of former Dorset CC) during a rapid reorganisation which then led into the pandemic. This was then followed by an interim DCS appointment with a different style and regarded as more of a “change agent”. That tenure concluded shortly after the failed inspection. The impact of that judgement on the LA is now seen to have been exacerbated by a perceived sense of prior confidence within the service leadership and the previous intervention. Perhaps understandably, that unfounded confidence probably also has fed into a degree of corporate and political scepticism or nervousness about the efficacy of a new improvement programme.
11. The new, substantive DCS has therefore very recently arrived in a post-pandemic, recently failed LA, which has significant unresolved issues from a hurried and complex LGR, with a developing corporate financial crisis and a finely balanced and potentially vulnerable political leadership which is preparing for elections in 2023. All of that is in the national context of substantial and accelerating pressures on children and children’s services.
12. In that context the DCS is establishing herself rapidly and constructively. I have received a range of unsolicited highly positive comments about her style and approach from a number of external and corporate stakeholders. As an experienced Adviser/Commissioner I have a good degree of confidence in her suitability, approach and progress so far. It is probably not too extreme to suggest that the pace and sustainability of future improvement are now dependent on her remaining in role with clear support from all concerned.
13. A largely new permanent departmental management team is also now in place, with a sensible structure, and making encouraging inroads into the range of challenges they have inherited. With a great deal of complex work to do, this internal leadership capacity now represents a potentially significant strength for the LA, although the management overhauls needed are by no means complete – these are still early days for a new and untested team. Their work must include a detailed and focussed approach to first and middle manager training and assessment modelled on equivalent improvement programmes elsewhere. It also needs to be backed by a generally strengthened culture of evidenced performance management and iterative improvement.

## **The Service Context**

14. In its well-established methodology, the Hampshire CC SLIP process is a “wrap around” approach involving a range of senior and service specialist managers working alongside their BCP counterparts. This works on three themes: leadership including resources; social work practice; quality assurance. For the purpose of this report the leadership issues are threaded throughout so this section will focus on practice and QA. The following

summarises some of the headlines reported to the BCP Improvement Board in the summer.

15. The SLIP has identified a number of important strengths in front line services, staff and managers. These are important building blocks and include: a generally positive attitude given the context; growing respect for and receptiveness towards the new leadership team (with some nervousness based on previous experience of instability); a notable sense of loyalty to BCP in some quarters and a commitment to improve for children; some good capacity – eg internal fostering and edge of care interventions; good early developing sense of challenge of poor practice, including by some more able agency workers towards substantive post holders; some improved communications between teams and managers; examples of good administrative support to teams; and a strong training offer – though less effective discipline in how well it is commissioned and utilised and by whom (something of a theme for BCP).
16. There are few surprises in the critical analysis of the service delivery which endorses the findings from the Ofsted inspection. It is not untypical that parts of BCP retained a view that Ofsted were either overly harsh or that the import of the judgement wasn't appreciated or applied elsewhere. Our analysis concurs with Ofsted. The following summary is not comprehensive but illustrative.
17. There is no defined practice model to act as a unifying force for staff and this links to a general lack of shared understanding of the child's experience or journey through the system – the shared purpose of the service. A previous attempt to introduce Signs of Safety had been made by the previous leadership team as the preferred model, but no comprehensive implementation and embedding took place. The SLIP found a sense of apparent "busyness" in some areas being used as an excuse for poor or non-existent recording practices (but note the IT systems issues below). This working culture also contributed to an occasionally exaggerated sense of pressures in some teams where caseloads are actually relatively lower, without doubting that there are certainly areas of very high caseloads linked to the recruiting difficulties. In some respects, it is the disparities in case load pressures which are striking. Some of these pressures are compounded by the presence of some smaller specialist teams which may be well regarded in what they do but which appear unaffordable, financially and otherwise, against the general challenges faced.
18. There is extremely high agency usage and dependency – over 80% in some key areas including the MASH. As well as being innately unstable, that usage probably also contributes to certain perceived blurred lines of roles and accountabilities. Those blurred lines occur throughout the chain of command, from service manager, to team manager and on to senior social workers, with some inconsistencies in delegations and authority. Also, not untypically in a failing service, there is confusion about thresholds of need and the nature of how and when cases should step up or down between levels of need and service. That applies within those services internally and with external partners. Conversely, BCP does benefit from some high-quality agency staff

- who are embedded in the service and skilled in their own practice and in challenging the practice of internal incumbents which can drive improvement.
19. Supervision is not frequent, consistent or sufficiently effective when it does take place. Policies and procedures are hard to access. The new DCS has observed that in some respects a number of processes seem more geared to support and protect staff or BCP rather than to prioritise the welfare of the child.
  20. These inconsistencies and challenges are further exacerbated in that one of the main unresolved legacies for children's services out of LGR remains a lack of a single client index system for case recording and management. There has been at least one failed deadline to rectify this in the course of this intervention. This is a major impediment to effective practice as well as an obstacle to effective service assessment and planning and improvement. The most senior corporate leaders are keen to stress their direct involvement in this now being resolved with a new November deadline for implantation.
  21. This systems problem also contributes to underdeveloped quality assurance – in systems and cultural terms. So, as well as recording effectively being impeded, expectations are lowered. As well as impacting on case management, this unreliable information system and culture probably draws into question the accuracy and validity of broader performance information at this stage. Once they get their new system, the working culture will need to be upgraded with it.
  22. The concept and discipline of quality assurance including case audit within the service are very under-developed and the service is at an early stage of “normalising” how the frank and routine interrogation of evidenced practice is a cornerstone to any sustainable improvement.
  23. As in all of this critique, the new management team recognises and understands the problems and is working well to begin to address the challenge. But this work is at a very early stage. The DCS highlights a need for a more overt and collective approach to child centric practices and systems. Her leadership in that respect will be significant. That will also need to be backed by a better recognition in some corporate circles of how deep and profound the ensuing change programme will have to be.
  24. At this point it is also worth noting that there has been an apparent step change in the way partners are engaging with the service, the management team and the partnership arrangements. Partners are making consistently positive comments about the new DCS and her in-coming team due to the constructive and transparent approaches. In turn it would appear that partners are increasingly confident in targeted to their own contributions but there is much collective work to be done to make this progress impact on practice. There is a notable challenge in current turnover in the NHS children's leadership alongside the arrival of the ICS. A related issue around the safeguarding partnership is explored further below.
  25. A further step change is that the voice of the child is beginning to be better heard and responded to at senior service and corporate levels.

## The Corporate Context

26. BCP was launched as a new unitary council in April 2019. It came from a local government reorganisation (LGR) that saw the merger of the two smaller unitaries of Bournemouth and Poole together with the Christchurch former district of the former Dorset County Council. The remaining districts of Dorset were merged into the new unitary Dorset Council. It is arguable that the multifaceted nature of the reorganisation was one of the most complex in recent local government history and that is bound to be a factor for this intervention. Whereas the reorganisation had been in inception and planning for several years (certainly at least between the two former unitaries), the latter stages of the process in particular included a number of complexities, some political and some structural. These in turn led to an unusually truncated period between LGR agreement and implementation which meant there was no opportunity to run a full shadow council, with a year taken off the normal timescale for LGR. That truncation arguably contributed to some more hurried steps which still implicate the progress of children's services to date (see below, for example, on IT and HR).
27. It is also worth noting that, while there is an inevitable residual sense within the service of some staff still affiliating with their former LA employer, there is increasing evidence of staff now identifying better with their new unitary employer. However, notably and contrary to some perceptions, none of the former authorities was a strong performer on children's services immediately prior to LGR. All were RI. Arguably, against the upheaval of LGR, that circumstance alone should have been a forewarning that considerable effort would have been required to at best sustain that performance in the new LA through the disruption of LGR. That said, within a year of LGR the pandemic had struck this forming authority and organisation, with all that entailed for organisational resilience and the severe impact on vulnerable children and their families.
28. During BCP's inception and launch, considerable work was done by the officer and political leadership about the form the new unitary would take, as should be expected. That work led into certain commitments about the shape and form of the organisation, and the nature and pace of different elements of transformation. These determinations ranged from some policy decisions about the approach of the new authority and its "operating model", including with regard to a strongly centralised model of business support and oversight to what, with external hindsight, appeared to be a firm approach to service efficiency to allow for more entrepreneurial and innovative economic development practices. Those were and are legitimate ambitions of any council, but how conducive they are to a previously struggling and now failing children's service has arguably not been well considered by the authority as a whole.
29. The consultancy firm, KPMG, has been working closely with the new council to help its reform agenda, especially with regard to business transformation. There have been two contracts with the external consultants – one which focussed on the design of the new council and its operating model, followed a

year later by a (separately procured) programme of implementation. That has included the establishing of the central business units to be formally known as “Centres of Excellence”, with no apparent sense of irony or appreciation of how such terminology will be received by the staff of a failing service who may perceive a lack of corporate business support to be a key dimension of their challenges. These developments are important not merely because children’s services will depend on these centres for key business support, but also because some of the terrain the centres cover is arguably service specific, such as with training and commissioning. This intervention has now been able to engage with the consultants to help develop a better sense of the corporate direction and processes, and in return to seek to ensure that the impact of those change programmes are well sighted on the state of children’s services.

30. In every failing children’s authority I have worked with it has been easy to detect a sense, at least partially, of corporate frustration if not resentment at the burden imposed on the wider LA by its failing children’s services. BCP is no different and there is no doubt that the route to improvement will require corporate services and leadership to recognise the reality of the position and that the new children’s leadership is not responsible for it.

Politically, the new LA has experienced some turbulence since its inception. The first administration following the first election was an Alliance coalition. That coalition lost power in mid-term to be replaced by a Conservative leadership originally as a minority administration, then a majority administration and now a minority administration again, evidencing a high degree of political vulnerability and uncertainty. Such is the nature of local politics, but the improvement of unstable local government services does not prosper easily in a less stable political context. That said, the leadership rightly stresses (and I have seen credible evidence of) a good level of cross-party consensus and support for the children’s improvement work. The next election is in May 2023 and there are bound to be tensions around how all parties campaign on universal issues while expensive and targeted children’s services are failing and demanding more focussed support. That especially applies to finance.

## **Finance**

31. Like all upper tier authorities, the finances of BCP are under significant duress and that is bound to impact upon children’s services, regardless of the intervention. Arguably, the position in BCP is more severe in the context of the post-LGR changes and some differing political approaches to financial strategy. The Inadequate children’s judgement and this intervention exacerbate BCP’s already serious financial challenge. As research increasingly indicates, failing children’s services are more expensive than successful children’s services. The BCP pressures relate to: establishing the true costs of and budget setting for the new council generally; followed by the pandemic; the as yet unrealised impact of resolving the financial implications of failing children’s services; sustaining a firm political commitment by the current administration to a council tax freeze; a politically driven approach to a particular model of the capitalisation of revenue as a route to addressing

pressures, exemplified by some controversial and publicly debated schemes to “borrow” against the council’s assets.

32. There are subsequently significant internal tensions surrounding the council’s finances. In the wider context of the council’s zero tax increase we know that central government funding of local services, especially adults’ and children’s social care, has in recent years shifted the balance away from dependency on central grant and towards (sometimes hypothecated) local tax increases. That shift is widely understood but of course accentuates the impact upon social care of any decision to freeze local taxation – especially with the four-fold pressures of: increasing demand; inflation; the cost of agency staff cover; and the cost of failure. The council also did apply the social care levy in the last round of budget setting notwithstanding the zero per cent commitment. The council has increased the funding for Children’s Services by £20.556m between 2019/20 and 2022/23, which represents a 34% increase in budget from the base budget that was inherited from the preceding councils of £60.942m, which reflects, in part, significantly increased demand. More work needs to be done to understand how this budget compares with statistical neighbours and how the budget is allocated between specific services. The LGA suggests that the typical cost to a council of an inadequate judgement ranges from £4 to £10m, and therefore this may require even more resources to be provided, whilst noting that this year’s budget is being overspent by approximately £7m (8.6%) and this overspend has been accommodated in the year-end forecasts and the Medium Term Financial Plan.
33. The internal tensions have related to an entirely legitimate political determination, backed by arguably less orthodox financial methods, to both ensure the council is run as efficiently as possible and to stand by their commitment to minimising costs to the electorate. That is versus a professional financial perspective that the numbers simply don’t stack up, especially in revenue terms, to sustain the corporate strategy (my non-accountancy wording). Those tensions have raised the possibility of officers needing to issue a 114 Notice with all the actual and perceived challenges that would entail.
34. Meanwhile, within the service the DCS is currently predicting a likely overspend of circa £7 million for the current financial year, which has been accommodated within the corporate estimates. That includes a combination of agency staffing costs, unmet previous savings commitments and, one would expect, placement costs. However, at present one quirk of what appears to be a weak financial reporting and monitoring culture within the service, is that placement costs are not apparently overspending – which seems curious and untypical. The DCS has legitimate concerns about the financial management skills of her service managers, and about the service understanding of some of the central financial officers. The financial system of the Council is due to be replaced in April 2023 with a single Enterprise Resource Platform which will enhance forecasting and budget monitoring.
35. There is a tactical dilemma around understanding corporate finances for this intervention. This intervention is not equipped to take on a full and detailed



assessment of the corporate financial context of children's services – in the best of circumstances let alone in this post-LGR authority with such unique, complex and apparently critical challenges. But the intervention cannot escape from considering the financial implications for the council of a failing service and for the service of such a financially challenged council. The Section 151 officer has asked that the Improvement Board should in future receive direct financial reports. I agree with that proposal but the reports will need to address both sides of the dilemmas summarised above – service and financial.

36. In a stressed and dynamic financial arena, at time of writing, some positive steps have been taken but significant financial risks remain to the improvement journey. Crucially, there is a developing constructive relationship between the 151 Officer and the DCS, internally and at the Improvement Board, which has to be the basis for any kind of progress and is an important signal. That will also help with the residual tensions within BCP, and typical in the circumstances, about the extent to which the right balance has previously been struck between informed and mutually understood professional and financial imperatives. There appears to have been some resolution of the council's dialogue with central government about what and how it can progress its asset-based borrowing strategy. Subsequently, it also appears that the imminent threat of a formal 114 notice has abated for the current year but not disappeared for future years. The council is now striving to achieve a viable and balanced budget strategy for four to five years in the context of the forthcoming election but, at time of writing, the budget gap remains significant.
37. Children's Services have to be a "corporate player" in this work but they are formally failing and that indicates significant risk to the welfare of vulnerable children in BCP. That stark point is not yet well registered in parts of the corporate whole. Any steps to reduce (rather than build) financial capacity of the statutory service at this time would be frankly dangerous. Meanwhile there may be opportunities to find further savings in non-statutory services but they will not be politically popular. From the perspective of this intervention the welfare issue must surely be paramount.

### **Other Corporate Support Services Post LGR**

38. At the inception of the new council in 2019, KPMG, the council's consultants hired to help drive the organisational transformation, produced "BCP Council – Organizational Design – Final Report". This is a complex and detailed document which sets out ways of future working for BCP, including a focus on streamlined centralised support services and an entrepreneurial culture. It is a sophisticated piece of work which is cited by senior officers as the council's "operating model" - a blue print for how the council will be designed and function. What is less clear is how that blue print matches subsequent real-time events such as the financial pressures of the organisation and the Inadequate judgement on children's services. Subsequently, the department has produced a simpler, and more up to date and tailored, piece of diagnostic work – "Children's Services Transformation – Summary Diagnostic and Action Plan" (from Commercially Public). Out of these assessments and taken from

interviews so far, I would highlight the following issues which require a particularly focussed approach for BCP to consider in the essential improvement work.

39. Linked to the separate section in this report, there is a clear need for **financial support** systems and approaches which will better respond to the needs of the service as it improves. It is generally agreed that the new DCS and her team bring a much improved financial acumen and transparency to their leadership of the service. Their concerns about the fitness of financial systems as well as levels of mutual awareness between finance and service managers will need to be responded to. A new corporate financial system is due for implementation in early '23. Without it, and in the context of both the failing judgement and the financial pressures, children's managers are fighting in the dark to control spend.
40. So far, over three years on from LGR, the **client information systems** for BCP children's services have not been properly merged. This is now an urgent problem. A recent deadline for completion has been passed. A new one has been set for November and must be met. This should be a basic if not urgent expectation to support improved practice.
41. There is a complex equal pay problem as the council is still working to a timetable of 2024 for the harmonisation of **pay structures** for the various staff groups working to the respective former LAs' terms and conditions. There are legal as well as financial barriers to accelerating this programme – especially given the wider equal pay implications. Unfortunately, further delay will mean that the most critical part of the workforce to children's improvement, the qualified social workers, continue to work on varying terms and conditions including pay. In a generally over-heated labour market BCP does not need this additional impediment to recruitment and retention. From this perspective that anomaly needs urgent resolution and Leader has indicated he sees this issue is a priority. BCP now confirm that they have agreed to bring this forward to an earlier Cabinet meeting, for Children's services.
42. There are continuing concerns that the work currently underway to further centralise **HR and training** functions will need to ensure that children's services improvement is not left short of professional expertise and the essential capacity to support the developing workforce. Centralised HR and training functions must create confidence that they are tuned into and responsive towards the urgent and service specific workforce pressures facing children's.
43. Finally on the point of corporate support, for reasons which appear to relate to pre-LGR legacy issues alongside the broader transformation plan, BCP has a corporate **generic commissioning** function. The rationale for this approach may be reasonable, but personally I have never encountered a situation where a DCS does not have direct full control and oversight of, as well as accountability for the commissioning of children's services, especially but not only children's placements. It remains to be seen how compatible this BCP corporate model may be to future service improvement.

## Safeguarding Partnership

44. Since LGR, BCP has shared its safeguarding partnership (formerly the LSCB) with Dorset Council. This decision was presumably taken based upon some of the benefits and history of “pan-Dorset” partnerships and working. The arrangement obviously makes particular sense to pan-Dorset agencies, such as police and health. It is also apparently currently preferred by Dorset Council (not yet verified), who are now rated Good in children’s services. The current partnership chair is a highly experienced strategic leader with good knowledge of the area. He is personally agnostic about the issue of a more locally specific safeguarding arrangement for BCP and rightly cautions against the risks of regarding structural reform as any kind of false solution to wider and deeper problems. It is also apparent that a previous attempt was considered to establish a BCP coterminous partnership arrangement but this was abandoned, at least partly because the then CCG “voted against”.
45. The current arrangement does include two “sub” partnerships based on the LA boundaries, with the pan-Dorset board acting as the over-arching mechanism. Some have suggested that in terms of pressure upon partner capacity, this current arrangement has the effect of “three boards” across the pan-Dorset geography. To me it also implies a potentially dangerous lack of clarity about the function of each of the current arrangements for a failing LA. It implies some confusion about where the authority and accountability rest within the partnership for a failing service.
46. Whereas I strongly agree with the caution against regarding structural reform as a panacea for improvement, I am personally not convinced about the effectiveness of this arrangement for any unitary children’s safeguarding partnership, let alone one that is failing. The partnership, including subsequent to the Wood Review, retains a critical statutory function whereby the safeguarding partners can hold each other to account for the effectiveness of practice and joint working – strategically and operationally. It remains the case through Children Act 1989 that the local authority is the lead agency for child protection in welfare terms – hence the usual arrangement for the partnership to be based on the LA’s boundaries. That applies in usual circumstances but the case for a coterminous partnership appears to me to be stronger in a circumstance where the LA is failing. It is, quite reasonably, the failing LA that “takes the hit” for that failure, yet here that LA does not have full control over its own safeguarding partnership governance which is shared with a Good LA. With full accountability needs to come full authority – BCP does not have full authority over its safeguarding partnership but is held to account for its failings. That is also why this must be a matter of final determination for the LA, rather than the partners, individually or collectively. In one respect, an effective change need not be so radical – it is possible to retain the pan-Dorset arrangement but on the understanding that the primary partnership is at the BCP level. I am not going so far as to direct the establishment of a coterminous partnership – yet. But I do think these points need fuller consideration by BCP and its local partners, with a final decision to be determined by BCP. I also wish to stress that these comments are not a

criticism of any pan-Dorset partners including Dorset Council. They are a reflection on how the partnership can focus on the needs of the failing lead agency without either detriment to the wider geography or the failing agency – it is a question of focus and clarity of accountability.

47. In the meantime, what is clear is the need for BCP statutory partners to be encouraged to continue to play a direct and active role in the work of the Improvement Board as it progresses.

### **The Improvement Board**

48. The BCP Improvement Board was established through the previous intervention and chaired by the previous DfE adviser (who also for a period agreed to be chair of the safeguarding partnership). The new board is chaired by myself and serviced by an almost entirely new management team. In some respects it is therefore a continuation but, especially bearing in mind that frankly the last improvement drive failed, it needs to seem and be more effective, focussed and interventionist where necessary. There is further work to be done, alongside the content of the improvement agenda, to ensure that the board is as effective as it needs to be given this history. That includes around collective engagement and also with regard to a necessary sharpening of the nature and use of performance data and oversight.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- i) Clearly, the intervention must be sustained. There is not yet an overwhelming case to trigger a structural (trust) solution, but a number of the corporate fragilities outlined above mean that the potential for that solution must be kept in mind.
- ii) The Improvement Board should be sustained but further work done on membership and terms of reference to ensure it can provide meaningful drive and oversight for the improvement journey.
- iii) That will include oversight of the SLIP work with HCC which will remain critical to progress.
- iv) The financial issues and risks need to be formally reported on to the IB so that all concerned, including DfE and the Adviser, are fully sighted on the risks and related developments.
- v) Further corporate work will be required to ensure the BCP model of corporate support services and systems is fully conducive to the children's improvement journey.
- vi) That should especially apply to pay harmonisation and the final resolution of the client information systems for the service. These are critical issues and failed progress on these alone should bring forward the trust question.
- vii) More work will also be required to ensure partners are fully engaged and supportive at the IB.
- viii) BCP and its DCS should lead partners in a clear appraisal of the potential risks and benefits of moving to a co-terminous BCP safeguarding partnership with that discussion to be under the oversight of the IB.

- ix) DfE should give close consideration to any bid for tangible support from BCP especially with regard to the establishment of a practice model for social workers.
- x) That should also include consideration of a management training and assessment model for the service at front and middle manager level.

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**October 2022**