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Ms Alison Jeffery
Director of Children's Services
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Christopher Russell HMI
Regional Director, South East

Sent by email to: alison.jeffery@portsmouthcc.gov.uk

Dear Alison

Annual Conversation - education and social care – 11 January 2018

Thank you for meeting with Janet Fraser, Janet Pearce, Stephen Long, Sue Mann, Stewart Jackson and myself to discuss social care and education in Portsmouth. Your insightful reflections and those of your team on strengths and development priorities in the local authority enabled a useful discussion.

You updated us on contextual changes in Portsmouth in recent years, and the impact of these on children's social care and education. You noted sluggish economic growth, rises in unaccompanied asylum seeking children and in levels of crime, including domestic abuse.

Social care

We noted you have confidence in the thresholds applied in the MASH which you have tested through audit and surveys. You consider the quality of assessments, conducted in the hubs, is good. Social workers understand the experience and needs of children well. Management oversight, and performance management systems, are in place, for example with managers reviewing assessments at key points and exception reporting on any assessments exceeding 45 days. You have revised your quality assurance process, and 'live' auditing with social workers has been well received by them and is a helpful opportunity for reflection on practice.

You have invested in training your staff in the restorative practice model of intervention and have had a good response from schools wishing to apply this approach.

We were interested to hear about your response to the high prevalence of domestic abuse in Portsmouth and the work you have done to develop, and evaluate, an effective intervention programme for perpetrators. We will be interested in the impact of the next phase of this work with children and families. You consider court work is strong and you report this is confirmed by the judiciary which has confidence in the quality of work presented to the courts by Portsmouth's social workers.

It was encouraging to hear about your successful partnership with Portsmouth University that has supported recruitment to social work posts. Retention has improved and you describe having strong succession planning with a number of posts filled through internal promotion. Vacancy rates are low and no team leader posts are vacant. Caseloads are currently slightly higher than you would like and your ambition is for them to reduce to 16.

Your children in care council is vibrant and children looked after and care-leavers have been involved in co-producing a number of initiatives. You consider you have made good progress in improving services for care leavers since the last inspection, with young people now receiving a 'health passport', increased numbers of young people 'staying out' and the receipt of innovation money to develop a 'staying close' project.

You told us repeat referrals, repeat child protection plans and placement stability, especially for your older more troubled children, are priorities for service improvement in Portsmouth. Improving the assessment of parent's ability to sustain change in early help, children in need and child protection work is one way you think you can achieve reductions in re-referrals and second plans. You hope the establishment of the multi-agency Harm and Exploitation service, and the trauma intervention model, will help improve placement stability, particularly for older looked after children.

We discussed some of the other challenges you face. These include the large number of unaccompanied asylum seekers that continue to arrive in Portsmouth, the need to develop independent reviewing officers as strong and confident advocates for children and to increase the level of reflection in supervision.

We discussed areas of the service which you think would be helpful to review if Portsmouth were to receive a focused visit. You suggested responses to children who go missing. We also considered thresholds in the MASH with a particular focus on the response to domestic abuse.

Education

We discussed changes in schools in the city. Half of the schools are now academies with more expected by the end of this year. Since the inspection of school improvement services in 2016 you have reorganised this work by setting up the Portsmouth Education Partnership. The partnership involves brokering support from local schools based on an improved awareness of the quality of provision in the city. Underpinning the system is a more accurate set of school performance data. You and your colleagues explained that the information is used to map capacity, and to challenge and support underperforming schools more effectively than in the past. The partnership's vision is for leadership of this work to pass increasingly to headteachers. It is early days in the work of the partnership and its impact has been variable so far. While there are signs that some schools requiring improvement reached higher standards in 2017, you note that outcomes for pupils remain too low.

You have regular contact with the Regional Schools Commissioner over the performance of academies and the brokering of any new arrangements. In most cases you believe trusts have the capacity to improve your schools, hence your engagement in the academy process. Nevertheless, our discussion showed you are not afraid to challenge the Commissioner when trusts underperform. You recognise the paucity of outstanding schools in the city and are reaching out to those in neighbouring areas. You have also seen success in a Strategic School Improvement Fund bid aimed at improving standards for disadvantaged pupils.

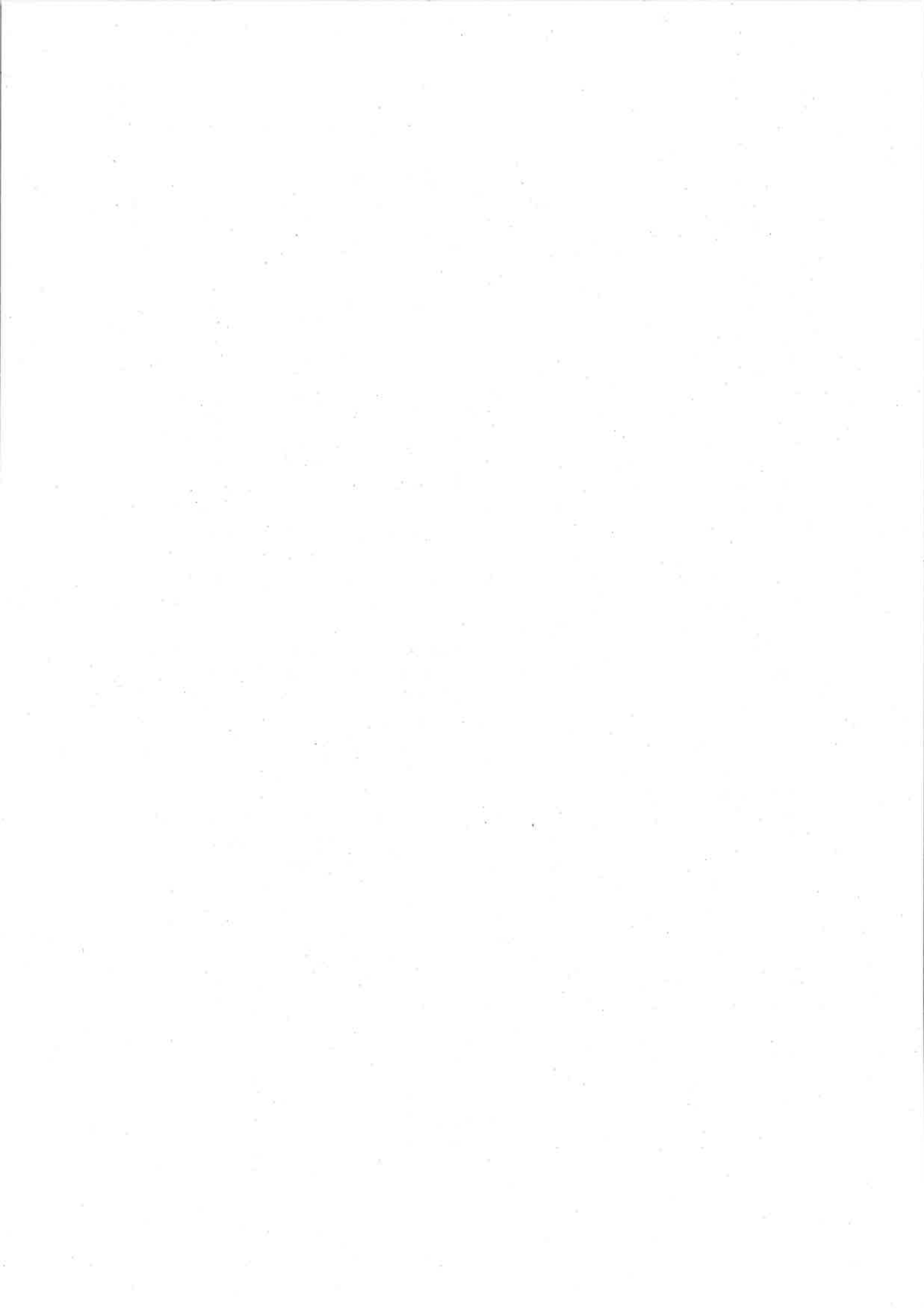
Turning to outcomes for children and young people, the proportion reaching a good level of development in the early years has risen in line with national figures and remains above them, but by a smaller figure in 2017 than before. Boys' outcomes were the main concern and you noted work to raise expectations in early years settings, including children's centres. You are keen to see results rise again to a position well above national. Phonics outcomes in 2017 were a disappointment. You have looked hard at this and found wide variations between schools, but no discernible patterns among groups of pupils. You are adopting a strategy of linking more effective schools with those where performance is a concern.

Outcomes in key stage 1 and 2 saw increases in line with national figures but remain below them. The progress made by pupils over time is understandably your main concern, with progress in writing at key stage 2 particularly weak. Through the work of the partnership, you have strengthened the moderation of pupils' writing at key stage 1. As a result, you now have more a more accurate view of pupils' attainment at the end of key stage 1 across the city. While this has brought figures down, you are confident that in the long run your improved approach will lead to better provision and outcomes, and accurate assessment is key to checking the impact.

Pupils' performance at key stage 4 continues to be below that nationally, albeit with signs of improving progress over time. The gap between disadvantaged pupils and others is narrower than in the region overall. You recognise that the systems designed to raise standards noted earlier now need to make an impact on key stage 4 achievement. There are wide variations in performance between schools, and your determination is clear that if some schools can do well, then others can too.

Your ambition to tackle attendance and exclusions is reflected in a wide range of strategies such as supporting specific families, addressing mental well-being, as well as providing support and challenge for individual schools. While attendance is improving, fixed term exclusions remain too high overall. This is mainly because of high figures in a number of schools, particularly at secondary level.

At post-16 you have taken effective steps to reduce the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training or whose activities are unknown. I agree with your dissatisfaction with educational outcomes for this age group and applaud your efforts to challenge providers where improvement is needed.



We discussed issues related to provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. You noted strengths in areas such as the production of education and health care plans, together with working with families, but a desire for better provision in mainstream schools and improved links between education and health services.

Work in the local authority around the Prevent strategy appears well coordinated, as does that to identify any unregistered schools. However, I share your concern over the numbers of pupils now electively home educated, which has risen sharply in recent years.

We discussed possible inputs in the city from Janet Pearce. These are likely to focus on providing feedback on your work to tackle the most pressing issues, alongside inputs which help clarify the work of Ofsted or provide support and challenge for improvement.

Thanks you once again for the meeting and I look forward to hearing about further developments in children's social care and education in Portsmouth.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Russell HMI
Regional Director, South East

