
West Sussex County Council's Children First Service Improvement Programme: Progress Report – July 2020

Introduction

- 1** I am writing with a further update to all members to coincide with the County Council meeting on 17 July. The service has emerged from one of the most challenging periods of its history, while continuing to deliver services, ensuring safeguarding remains strong, and pressing forward with its improvement work.
- 2** I wish to pay tribute to our staff, who have remained healthy, committed and full of resourcefulness to keep our children and young people safe and connected at this time. When I spoke to the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee on 4 June, I highlighted the great work of the Young Carers service, and our Pause team continuing to engage with vulnerable young mothers in Early Help. These are but two examples among many that could have been chosen from across the service to highlight the success of our continuity planning, and the tenacity with which staff have stuck to their task.

Covid-19 Response

- 3** Throughout the crisis, operational capacity has never fallen below 90%, and staff have had access to the full range of protective equipment, as well as virus-testing facilities where necessary. Our detailed assessment of risk has allowed us to concentrate resources where most needed, and safeguarding has remained robust. We have taken the opportunity to explore to the full the ability of electronic means to provide connectivity and assurance, both to our care professionals and within the families themselves. Indeed, one of the major discoveries of this period has been the extent to which young people have engaged positively in video conferencing and social media as a means of expressing themselves and supporting their wellbeing: this is a theme touched on by our Youth Cabinet Chair in her report, which is set out at the end of this report.

Covid-19 Recovery

- 4** As was to be expected, the easing of restrictions has generated a surge in demand, and we have had plans in place to address this. The partial reopening of schools, with whom we work very closely, has, as expected, led to an increase in referrals; court work has inevitably been paused and there are backlogs in health assessments to catch up with. We have been paying particular attention to returning our face-to-face visiting to normal levels. It goes without saying that the health and safety of everyone involved remains the paramount consideration.

Service Leadership

- 5** It is a great pleasure to be working with our Executive Director, Lucy Butler, who is in the process of establishing her management team. This includes making permanent appointments to the Assistant Director posts for Corporate Parenting and Quality Assurance – two of the key areas in our drive for improvement.

Ofsted & Children's Trust

- 6** Ofsted has currently suspended its inspection regime due to the Covid-19 crisis, which means a delay in the sequence of Monitoring Visits, probably until the

autumn. However, in common with a number of other authorities, Ofsted inspectors who are currently unable to undertake inspection duties are working within the service in an advisory capacity, which is a welcome source of expertise.

- 7 In regard to the possible Children's Trust, the Department for Education has confirmed that there will be a three-month delay in the timetable.

Creating the Foundations for a Good Service

- 8 The most important task now before us is to create the conditions for a service that we can genuinely call 'Good'. This is demonstrated by three 'pillars':
- **Pillar 1 - 'What good looks like':** it is essential for us to set standards of expectation that everyone in the service understands and can measure themselves against.
 - **Pillar 2 - Creating the right Environment:** this includes developing 'the social work offer' – comprising competitive remuneration, the best working environment, a balanced workload, the right equipment, professional techniques and support for staff – in other words making West Sussex a place that naturally attracts the best social work talent.
 - **Pillar 3 - Improved Service Model:** this is how we frame our entire service offer, recognising the need to manage demand and reduce escalation through a preventive approach, always with children and families at the heart of everything we do. This will be a model that recognises the needs of local areas, and in which we will invite our partners to take their full share.

I will report further on this programme over the coming months.

Strengthening the Workforce within the new model

- 9 The issues that we have been continuously monitoring, including the vacancy gap, the contribution of agency workers, and staff caseloads remain in a broadly satisfactory state. Having achieved this stability, we must push on and design our new service around a set of core principles. One of these is making West Sussex a rewarding place to work in terms of remuneration, high professional standards and organisational efficiency (as set out in Pillar 2 above). We have been running a Recruitment and Retention scheme that will expire later in the year; we now need to design permanent and sustainable new arrangements that give full expression to these principles. In the meantime, it is pleasing to report that we have completed recruitment for our next Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSW) cohort, with 27 NQSWs due to start by September.

Continued Service Improvement

- 10 Notwithstanding the pandemic, a range of improvement activities has continued, including the following:
- A new Children Looked After and Care Leavers Strategy has been produced in consultation with key stakeholders, including the Corporate Parenting Panel, and is due for formal adoption this month. This is very welcome, since it makes a clear promise that those cared for by the authority will have the same expectations as any other child would have, of being involved in decisions about their care, of support to be happy and healthy, of receiving advice, and

full access to education and training in readiness for the adult world. Alongside this we are strengthening our practical service offer to support care leavers.

- Our Improvement Board and Partnership have continued to meet virtually as planned, giving continued oversight of the improvement process. The Partner in Practice work with Hampshire has progressed and is yielding sound results in terms of tightening standards through the auditing of casework.
- A programme of continued staff-training and development has now been organised on a virtual basis.
- In spite of the constraints of the pandemic, in April and May over 80% of the workforce received managerial supervision: this is an essential part of improved learning and performance management.
- Lucy Butler has hosted two virtual Staff Engagement sessions for the entire Children's Social Care, Early Help and Education and Skills workforce.

Youth Cabinet

11 I am delighted to end this update by introducing once again a message from Daisy, the Chair of our Youth Cabinet. It has been a great pleasure for me to get to know our young politicians and find out about the important work that they do. Not only am I deeply impressed by the level of enthusiasm and commitment shown, but I have come to appreciate more fully that as senior politicians we can always learn more about working effectively with young people, to ensure that they do indeed remain right at the heart of all that we do.

With my best wishes for your continued good health.

For information

Jacquie Russell

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

Contact Officer: Lance John, Business Manager, 033 022 23456

Statement from the Chair of West Sussex Youth Cabinet

The Youth Cabinet has had a month of decision making, with the introduction of new campaigns, roles and organising our schedule. Due to Covid-19, much of our annual plan has been pushed forward, so we have had to make some tough calls regarding events and prior campaign plans. Our Covid-19 Wellbeing campaign came to a close this month, and the impressions on social media have been incredible. We reached 11,000 people over 11 days; this is a fantastic achievement for such a short amount of time. We also initiated our 'Area of Interest' programme, which allows all young people in the Youth Cabinet to work within an area of the actual Cabinet jointly with the Cabinet Member connected. This should be a brilliant new venture for the Youth Cabinet that enables young people to get even more involved in politics and making change. Our first consultation occurred this month as well, with a mental health service asking us for our opinions on their name, 'brand' and wording. It has certainly been a busy month, and with all the planning going ahead, it should be another active few months for the West Sussex Youth Cabinet.