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

### **Introduction**

- 1** I am providing a further update to all members to coincide with the County Council meeting on 11 December. At the time of writing we await the formal outcomes of the recent Ofsted visit, so I would like to take this opportunity to highlight here some recent engagement activities with young people.

### **Ofsted Focused Visit, October 2020**

- 2** My last update covered the Focused Visit of inspection carried out by Ofsted between 12 and 22 October. This event is very important to us in Children's Services, since it allows for an objective appraisal and evaluation of the improvements made so far. The final report of the Ofsted findings will have been published, on 4 December, and I look forward to providing further information and comment at the full Council meeting.

### **Exceptional People in Care (EPIC) Awards**

- 3** The EPIC Awards this year were held on 7 November, organised through the Children in Care Council, and expertly hosted by our Children's Voice and Participation Team. This is an annual showcase for the achievements of children in care and care leavers, recognising the work that foster carers and our other partners do alongside our own staff to support them. It is co-ordinated by Children's Services as part of the County Council's offer to children and young people in our care community.
- 4** The fact that the ceremony itself had to be virtual this year reminds us of the additional difficulties that children and young people have faced throughout the Pandemic, especially when schools were closed during the first lockdown. Nonetheless, over 300 award nominations were received, covering an extraordinary range of achievement. This was also an opportunity to profile other support services to young people in care, such as advocacy, independent visitor and short breaks, as well as Special Educational Needs and Health services. I was enormously impressed by the great spirit in evidence amongst our care community, and it is truly inspiring to realise what can be achieved to overcome disadvantage, when we put young lives at the centre of all that we do.

### **The Youth Cabinet**

- 5** We have sought to raise the profile of the Youth Cabinet, who are 46 young people aged 11 to 18, elected by their peers from around the county to represent their views. It provides a forum for learning about, discussing and disseminating information on social and political issues vital to a world in which young people are growing to adulthood, and is in the best tradition of our democracy. Members will be aware of the regular updates of its activities included with this report by the Chair of the Youth Cabinet. An update from the Chair on their latest activities is set out at the end of the report.
- 6** A member of the Youth Cabinet recently gave very high-quality testimony to the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee regarding the experiences of pupils returning to school against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic. I am particularly pleased that we are hearing the voice of young people

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now, in ways that will allow services to adapt operationally to understand and respond to expressed need. In the broader perspective, young people also have much to tell us, especially at a time of national and international crisis, about their vision of a fairer, safer and indeed a happier world.

### **Youth Cabinet Annual Debate**

- 7** The Annual Debate of the Youth Cabinet was held on 19 November, introduced by the Chairman of the County Council, and I was privileged to participate. Also invited were UK Youth Parliament members, county councillors, council officers and other guests, including the High Sheriff and MPs. The agreed subject was 'Racial Inequality: how to improve and influence the pastoral curriculum at schools and colleges in West Sussex, to ensure all young people have a better understanding of the issue and those experiencing discrimination get the support they need'. This led to a fascinating and very well-informed debate, generating many ideas from the young people, and supported by the wide range of experience present.

### **Youth Cabinet attendance at WSCC Cabinet**

- 8** On 24 November, the Youth Cabinet Chair addressed our own Cabinet with an update on its recent activities and future plans. This included a review of its campaigns on the Environment, Mental Health and Racial Inequality, together with reflections on the Pandemic. It was most gratifying to note a recognition from the young people that there is now much greater engagement from the County Council on subjects that matter to them. This has included discussions with individual Cabinet Members on topics in their portfolios, and I continue to meet with the Youth Cabinet Chair on a monthly basis. I would ask all members to be open to involvement in Youth Cabinet activities, and I feel strongly that this maturing relationship does great credit to our young people, and is good for our county.

### **Children's Services Operations and Improvement**

- 9** The following key activities within the service improvement agenda look towards the planned service re-design in 2021:
- The robust service response to COVID-19 continues, maximising face to face visits, and based on a safeguarding RAG-rating of all cases; increases in demand are being managed effectively within the service.
  - Work is continuing on the Early Help re-design, a review of the allowance scheme for Foster Carers and preparation for further proposed changes to Children's Services next year.
  - An intensive management assessment and development programme will shortly commence; this will support the layering of posts which do not add value within the vision for the new service, in line with the Commissioner's recommendation to us in his report.
  - The service is working with 'The Care Leaders Fellowship' to provide coaching and training, aimed at ensuring we have ways of validating that the views of young people are embedded in all the work we do.
  - I have recently visited all three of the children's homes, now being redeveloped - Cissbury Lodge at Worthing, May House and Seaside at Shoreham, in order to inspect the progress of the work, and have been very excited by the prospect of creating these brand-new facilities.

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## **Conclusion**

- 10** I hope that all members will share my sense of enthusiasm for the hard work that is continuing within the service, and will pay tribute to the young people themselves, whose achievements I have highlighted on this occasion. Let us continue to keep in clear view the journey before us and draw inspiration from their example.

With my best wishes for your continued good health.

## **For information**

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## **Statement from the Chair of West Sussex Youth Cabinet**

**December 2020**

The Youth Cabinet had their annual debate with the Cabinet, Council and MPs this month on the topic of Racial Inequality: how to improve and influence the pastoral curriculum at schools and colleges in West Sussex, to ensure all young people have a better understanding of the issue and those experiencing discrimination get the support they need. The debate ran smoothly, and every Youth Cabinet member who contributed made valuable points. The discussion highlighted the need for conversations around these complicated issues and demonstrated just how much we could learn from one another. We're all looking forward to next year!

The next steps for the Youth Cabinet will be working with those members of either the Cabinet or external guests that offered invitations or opportunities to our young people. Hopefully, we can use the experience of this debate to make West Sussex a more inclusive and diverse place for everyone.

The debate was our main event this month. With Christmas approaching, we're in the planning stages for a lot of exciting new campaign sub-events and preparing for the Make Your Mark results on 1 December. Our Mental Health campaign is organising some webinars in January working with the Youth Emotional Support service (YES) team and schools to tackle stigma and encourage positivity. Our Tackling Racial Inequality team is creating school ambassadors with the help of a County Council officer to encourage schools to become more diverse and inclusive. Furthermore, our Knife Crime Campaign from last Cabinet term has finally had their posters approved, and will see them going out as soon as possible. The Environmental campaign is working with Wild West Sussex and the Marine Conservation Society on marine conservation in January, and a series of webinars of sustainability in February.

2021 is going to be as busy, if not more active than 2020 was, and I know I can speak for the whole Cabinet when I say we plan on making an unprecedented amount of progress for the youth of West Sussex.