

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

10 March 2021

Children First Improvement – Service Update

Report by the Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning

Summary

To assist the Committee in its role of scrutinising the Children First Improvement Programme, this report provides an update on service developments since its last meeting on 7 January 2021 and includes topics on which the Committee has requested further information. The report sets out the following:

- a) The latest position regarding external regulatory scrutiny of the service including plans for the next Ofsted Monitoring Visit and the Commissioner's Performance Framework. (Section 2).
- b) An update on the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on service demand and the service performance response (Section 3).
- c) An update on the continuing Service Redesign process (Section 4).
- d) A digest of other service improvement projects (Section 5).

The focus for Scrutiny

The Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the progress made on the Children First Improvement Programme, as set out in this report.

Key areas for scrutiny include:

- a) To consider whether the current and continuing transformation activity provides assurance that the objectives for improved outcomes for children and young people will be met.
- b) To consider the update on the service's performance in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and how the service continues to meet the needs of children and young people.
- c) To receive and consider the latest updates on Service Redesign and other service improvements.

The Chairman will summarise the output of the debate for consideration by the Committee.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report is part of a series that provides the Committee with a regular update on plans and actions from the Children First improvement and service transformation programme. It summarises recent developments and activities within regulatory scrutiny, service delivery, transformation and

redesign processes and includes areas where the Committee has previously requested information.

2. Regulatory Scrutiny of the Service

Ofsted Monitoring Visits

- 2.1 Following the satisfactory outcome of the Ofsted Focused Visit in October 2020, notification has been received of the regulator's plans to undertake shorter Monitoring Visits. It is intended that these will enable Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE) to validate the continuing service improvement and identify any areas where a greater focus is required. The first of these visits had been scheduled in the first week of March 2021, but the current Covid-19 lockdown has caused this timetable to be changed. The visit is now expected to take place on 25 and 26 May 2021.
- 2.2 The focus of this next monitoring visit will be on achieving permanence for children whom we look after. Preparations for the visit are already in hand, with work across the service to ensure that all children cared for by the authority have quality, timely and effective permanence plans in place in order to achieve the best outcomes. This area of work is closely monitored by the Corporate Parenting Panel.
- 2.3 Ofsted monitoring visits will continue on a quarterly basis, with a further visit expected in September 2021. Improvement activity generally continues at pace, as set out elsewhere in this report.

Children's Services Commissioner

- 2.4 The Committee will recall that in December 2020 the Secretary of State agreed to pause the Children's Trust process, with direct control of children's services remaining with the County Council for a further year. Over the course of this year the Commissioner for Children's Services in West Sussex will continue to monitor the progress of service improvement against a range of criteria, leading to a formal view and recommendation to the DfE at the end of this period as to whether there is any remaining case to establish a Children's Trust external to the County Council. It is therefore imperative that the current trajectory of improvement is sustained. During this period, continuing support and constructive challenge will be received from West Sussex's partner in practice, Hampshire County Council.
- 2.5 The Commissioner, John Coughlan confirmed this position at his presentation to elected members on 22 February. He emphasised the need to maintain the level of pace in order to demonstrate to the Secretary of State that the Council is able to maintain a fully effective children's services department without the need for a Trust. The Commissioner will formally review our progress in July, with a final decision on the future of the service expected not later than January 2022.
- 2.6 The Commissioner's Trust decision criteria will form part of the Departmental monthly performance report cycle to ensure that a regular focus is maintained on these issues and to provide the Commissioner with the relevant evidence to secure the service within the Council.

3. Service Demand and Response during the Pandemic - Update

3.1 This section examines the latest sequence of performance data relevant to overall service delivery during the pandemic, which the Committee has asked to be kept informed about. Appendix 1 contains key information up to the end of January 2021 given in graphic form, as reported to the Children First Improvement Board on 25 February.

3.2 The salient points are as follows:

MASH Performance

- i) The most recent period of school closures has led to a reduction in both initial contacts and subsequent referrals, similar to that experienced during the first lockdown in April 2020. Accordingly, it is to be expected that when schools reopen to all pupils on 8 March 2021, a corresponding pattern will be seen as in the Autumn of 2020, with large increases in reporting and referral. The service is making plans to manage its response on this basis in the coming months and has gained sound experience of handling fluctuating demand during 2020.
- ii) It should also be noted that, while there is now a lower 'conversion rate' of contacts to referrals, this reflects the service's stated aim of identifying the right cases to bring through to referral and by applying the agreed thresholds correctly to work with greater efficiency, while maintaining overall effectiveness. The 'Single Front Door' introduced in January 2021 is designed to further improve the efficiency with which contacts are processed, by bringing together the early help and social care contact points into the one service.

Child Protection Performance

- iii) The stable figures illustrate a robust service response in general. In particular the service is monitoring very closely those children who are on Child Protection (CP) plans for 18 months or more. Performance on statutory visits has improved to 86%, having been 83% in November, as reported to the previous meeting of the Committee.

Children Looked After

- iv) The general picture again is one of stability; the recent slight reduction will be tracked into subsequent months, and the cause of this is not yet clear. West Sussex's overall position is in line with its statistical neighbour (SN) authorities.

Performance Summary

3.3 The performance information suggests that the service has both managed the operational impact of Covid-19 and responded effectively to the imperative for children to be kept safe. Staff continue to perform consistently well and have shown a high degree of resilience under difficult circumstances. As previously reported, there has been low staff absence and every sign of effective co-working with partners. In particular there has been close co-operation with schools throughout. Face-to-face visiting has been

maintained as the default approach. Performance efficiency in general has been sustained - for instance, the Timeliness of Contacts and Referrals has further improved since the last report, with 96.5% of contacts completed in 3 days and 94.7% of referrals completed in 3 days. Re-referrals are at 25%, having been 30.5% in June 2020, indicating an increase in process efficiency and quality of assessment.

Covid-19 Vaccination for front-line staff

- 3.4 From the beginning of February 2021 an NHS programme of vaccination for eligible children's health and care services staff has been in operation; those eligible include the Council's front-line staff and external provider social care staff and foster carers. The service has worked closely with the NHS to ensure that all eligible staff and co-workers are enabled to receive the vaccination as efficiently as possible, and the position is being closely monitored. It is anticipated that the majority of eligible County Council staff able to receive the vaccine will have completed their first inoculation by the end of February, and a verbal update on the position will be provided at the Committee meeting.

4. Service Redesign update

Redesign workshops

- 4.1 Previous reports to this Committee have introduced members to the main elements of the Service Transformation programme. The service is continuing an intensive period of redesign activity. Between December 2020 and February 2021, a series of transformation workshops have been run with staff representatives, covering the following service areas, which correspond to the functional workstreams of the Transformation programme:
- Family Safeguarding
 - Fostering Service
 - Children with Disabilities
 - Children Looked After & Leaving Care
 - Safeguarding & Quality Assurance
 - Youth Justice & Exploitation
 - Commissioning
- 4.2 The purpose of these workshops has been to ensure that the voice of staff is heard as the process unfolds, to answer staff questions and give them a chance to contribute their own ideas for future improvements. At the same time, the opportunity has been taken for management to remain close to the experience of practitioners across the service during the constraints of lockdown. Feedback received has been that staff have welcomed the events; the attendees felt listened to and valued for their work; they could see that management has been delivering on its commitment to a high standard of communication during what is acknowledged to be a demanding period of rapid change.
- 4.3 The workshop activity has resulted in further developments of the service design, with the Family Safeguarding model at its heart. Task-and-finish groups have been set up to take the detailed service re-design work forward.

This will include finalising the service and team structures, target case allocation numbers and the co-location of services. Work has also progressed to improve the overall effectiveness of practice management through a comprehensive assessment programme, management development training and de-layering of management structures. All of these actions specifically address the Commissioner's and Ofsted's recommendations. The overall programme will continue to facilitate service improvements and re-design in a step-by-step way over the next twelve months, with the goal of the Family Safeguarding service being functional between January and March 2022.

Management Assessment & Development Programme

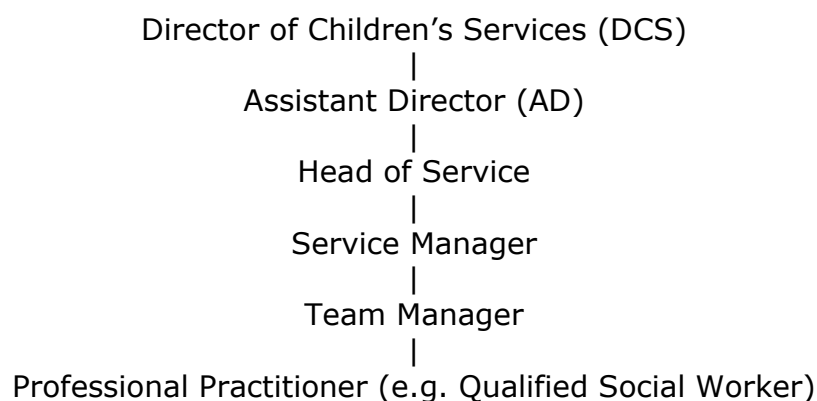
4.3 As outlined above, the delivery of the Management Assessment and Development Programme is in progress and will be completed in May 2021; its delivery is being supported by specialist external consultants. Following the initial assessment, managers will have access to a bespoke management training and development programme throughout the Spring and Summer. The programme is an essential foundation on which to build other aspects of service transformation, stressing the following components:

- It invests in the managerial staff through an inspirational, high-impact development programme.
- It aligns with the findings of the Ofsted inspection and Commissioner's report, thereby contributing to the necessary process of delayering and simplifying managerial levels (4.4 below).
- It will support the cultural and practice improvements that managers need to make to bring sustainable, long-lasting change as service leaders.

Feedback from managers to date has been broadly welcoming of this initiative, and a fuller report will be made as the programme progresses.

Staffing Structure

4.4 In alignment with the above, a simplified staffing structure will be brought into place from July 2021. This addresses a concern expressed in the Children's Commissioner's original report regarding excessive layers of management and ambiguity of job titles and roles, which he advised were hampering service effectiveness. The new structure will be as follows:



Social Work Offer

- 4.5 Setting out a clear service structure naturally precedes the implementation of the new Social Work Offer, which articulates the competitive remuneration terms and other benefits that will be available to staff within the redesigned service. The Offer will be launched to coordinate with the new structure in July 2021. In the meantime, the staff retention scheme has been very well subscribed to, with an up-take of 95%.

Update on Family Safeguarding

- 4.6 The Committee has previously received an account of the main elements of the Family Safeguarding model (FSM). In its essentials, the FSM takes the journey of the child as its starting point and puts children, young people and their families right at the heart of all service decisions. In doing so it takes full account of the child's relationships, the family context and the broader parenting strengths and vulnerabilities that may be present. It fully grasps the primacy of early intervention, both to avoid the tragedy of family breakdown, and thereby to seek to minimise demand for costly, high-end social care services. It promotes efficient working between different practitioner disciplines and seeks to maximise the value of partnership co-operation – not least through modelling economies that partner agencies themselves can achieve under the new FSM approach.
- 4.7 In operational terms, the five key features of the new Model can be summarised as follows:
- i) **Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDTs):** specialist adult workers with domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health expertise working within social work teams.
 - ii) **Motivational Interviewing (MI):** a strengths-based approach designed to better engage and structure conversations with families.
 - iii) **Electronic Workbook:** a new method of recording case notes that aims to improve information sharing and reduce the amount of time practitioners spend on reporting.
 - iv) **Group Case Supervision (GCS):** monthly supervision meetings for each case, allowing practitioners to review progress, discuss outcomes and agree next steps.
 - v) **Eight Module Intervention Programme and Parenting Assessment:** the intervention programme provides a framework for practitioners' direct work with children and families through Family Safeguarding. The parenting assessment enables practitioners to capture the work completed through the intervention programme and document the outcomes achieved.

It is anticipated that Family Safeguarding will receive an iterative roll-out, becoming fully functional between January-March 2022.

5. Other Service Improvement Updates

The following is a summary of other recent and forthcoming developments within the service improvement agenda:

Early Help Review

- 5.1 Following consideration by this Committee on 7 January and subsequent Cabinet approval on 23 February, a public consultation on the Early Help re-design proposal will be launched on 8 March, and will run for 10 weeks. The outcomes of consultation will be reviewed at this Committee in June 2021, with a final determination on the detailed design of the service by Cabinet in July.

Residential Services Update

- 5.2 The completion of construction of the three new residential homes remains on target for late March 2021, with registration and a phased reopening expected to follow from April onwards; staff recruitment is in progress. The three open homes have continued to operate effectively despite the challenges of the pandemic, with all residential staff due to receive the vaccine promptly. The residential review continues, as part of the overall service restructuring proposals.
- 5.3 The work that the homes has been doing with children has been highly praised following two recent Ofsted assurance visits - one at Teasel Close in October 2020 and another at Orchard House in December. Ofsted have recognised how these homes promote 'the development of caring, warm and supportive relationships', respecting each child's unique needs. One child told the inspectors: "This home has changed my life" and "They have taught me to trust again". Despite the current constraints, the children in all homes have continued to achieve and to flourish. It is hoped to be able to organise a visit for members to the new facilities later in the Spring.

Voice and Participation Update

- 5.4 Previous reports have referred to work in progress to enhance the service's ability to hear and respond within its practice to the voice of children and young people, and to enable them to participate in decisions affecting them. The following items give a flavour of the current developmental activities being undertaken.
- i) The Voice and Participation (V&P) team is being supported by a consultancy from the Care Leavers Fellowship, which is evaluating the Council's current work on participation. Based on this, the developmental focus will include enhancing the digital participation offer and rebranding the work of the team, with V&P being championed in different parts of the service.
 - ii) In terms of participation, a care leaver has helped develop the 'Care Leaver Advisory Board'. The Board is made up of six care leavers who have volunteered to join the group. It aims to support service improvement, ensuring that care leaver voices are heard and can influence change by providing an opportunity to share lived experiences with decision-makers. It has links with the Corporate Parenting Panel.
 - iii) The Children in Care Council has continued to meet online; it has helped shape change in the service's approach to Life Story work. Its members are currently working with the service to help redesign the Corporate

Parenting Panel terms of reference, to make sure that the voice of young people is fully represented.

- iv) The V&P team has run holiday workshops for children in care and sons and daughters of foster carers, to offer them a chance to make new friends while also helping to influence services. They have taken part in a comic drawing workshop and a theatre workshop with Chichester Festival Theatre.

6. Issues for consideration by the Scrutiny Committee

- 6.1 The Committee is invited to review the material presented in this report and confirm that it is satisfied with the pace and quality of the improvement activity across the Children, Young People & Education Department.

7. Consultation

- 7.1 Not applicable – this is a report for information.

8. Risk Implications and Mitigations

- 8.1 A summary of the risk areas identified in the current risk log, and the associated mitigating factors, is given in the table below:

Risk Area	Examples of Mitigating Actions
The Covid-19 pandemic may continue to impact the delivery of the service in various ways: safeguarding of children must be assured; staff vaccinations need to be completed and staff kept safe from infection; protective equipment must be sufficiently available to sustain face-to-face interaction with children and families, and in residential settings	The service has dealt well with the pandemic to date, as confirmed recently by Ofsted; much learning has resulted, and new ways of working have been developed. This risk is thought to be under control, with safeguarding and wellbeing issues soundly catered for. The majority of staff have now received at least their first vaccination. Satisfactory performance information endorses this position (Section 3 refers).
A surge in demand following the cessation of Covid-19 restrictions, and return of all children to school in March 2021	As with the end of previous lockdowns, an increase in demand across the service is to be expected following a general return to school. The service has planned for these factors in advance, and the situation is under control (as discussed in Section 3). Service Redesign and the new service model (Family Safeguarding) will support greater efficiency in the management of future demand.
Knowing that the service is safer for children	Every aspect of the improvement agenda is orientated towards this fundamental issue, from Workforce through Practice

Risk Area	Examples of Mitigating Actions
	Improvement, to Performance Management, Governance, Scrutiny and use of Technology: it is a whole-system issue. Again, the service transformation work will further enhance outcomes in the round. The recent Ofsted opinion and DfE intervention, together with the views of the Commissioner provide external assurance of improved service stability in this respect.
Understanding and applying quality practice	A Practice Improvement Plan is in place to implement quality standards and assurance, and will increase in effectiveness in a redesigned workforce with a new service delivery model.
Multi-agency capacity and capability	The joint undertakings with partners are very strongly stressed in the design principles of the proposed changes, and the departmental leadership team works with key partners to develop a joined-up approach to service delivery. Family Safeguarding offers strong incentives to partners in terms of managing their own levels of demand.
Demonstrating to the Commissioner, Ofsted and the DfE that the service can continue its improvement journey	The service has demonstrated to the Commissioner, to Ofsted and the DfE that it has the ambition and capacity for comprehensive change. The Commissioner has signified that he is satisfied with the direction of travel to date, and his criteria for final assessment have been made clear. Feedback from the Ofsted Focused Visit in October 2020 was further evidence that the service has an accurate self-evaluation, that improvement plans are appropriately focused on key service areas and that an acceleration of the previous level of progress is now possible.
Leadership capacity and capability	The permanent leadership team is now well established, and some temporary high-level support has been retained to assist in the short-medium term. Leadership has been commended by the Commissioner, Ofsted and the DfE.
Organisational morale & retention of experienced social work staff, in the context of national market scarcity and competition	This risk is comprehensively addressed in the Service Redesign proposals and the Staff Retention and Social Work Offer provisions. Positive feedback has been received from recent staff engagement exercises.

Risk Area	Examples of Mitigating Actions
from other authorities for their services	
Social workers encumbered with administrative burdens are less effective	Within the Service Redesign the need has been recognised to remove unnecessary administration and to maximise productive professional time with clients. The Single Front Door is an example of this principle being operationalised. Improving technology is a cross-cutting principle of service redesign.
Data management not supporting good practice	Using technology to improve the service is recognised as a priority; an ICT development workstream is in place, allied to quality improvement projects. Much has been learned from managing Covid-19 about more effective use of technology.
Preparedness for cycle of Ofsted monitoring visits	The senior leadership team maintains regular Ofsted readiness meetings to plan and coordinate the work. The successful Ofsted Focused Visit demonstrates that these processes are effective.

9. Other Options Considered

9.1 Not applicable – this is a report for information.

10. Equality Duty

- 10.1 The service recognises the primary importance of child safeguarding, sound family relationships, good parenting, and the nurture of children to fulfil their potential. The provision of the service is based on need, as determined through formal assessment protocols. This need is not explicitly related to formally protected characteristics, but any such characteristic is and will continue (as now) to be respected in compliance with equality principles and taken into account in the way in which the service is delivered.
- 10.2 In terms of those with a protected characteristic, the service will ensure enablement and support across all relevant categories, and this will both continue and be enhanced through the Children First agenda.

11. Social Value

- 11.1 The Children First agenda and measures for service recovery discussed in this report will directly support improved delivery of the West Sussex Plan priority to give every child the Best Start in Life. Enhancing the protection of young lives and support for family life will continue to build resilience and social capital and contribute towards stronger and more effective communities. The implementation of the service improvements will also respect

sustainability principles in accordance with the County Council's strategic policies.

12. Crime and Disorder Implications

- 12.1 There are positive implications for Sections 17, 37 and 39 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 in the prevention and reduction of crime and anti-social behaviour, and in reducing offending and re-offending by young people, all of which are affected by the progress activity discussed in this report.

13. Human Rights Implications

- 13.1 The County Council has an overriding duty to safeguard the Human Rights of children in need, and this has been recognised in the Children First agenda. The Council is mindful of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights – The Right to Respect for Family and Private Life - and has taken relevant factors into consideration in preparing this report. The processing of personal and special category data is subject to the Council's Data Protection Act policies and procedures in relation to discharging the Council's and its partners' legal responsibilities.
- 13.2 The County Council is also mindful of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - which states that all children have the right to be consulted and to have their opinions heard on any decision that affects them. Hearing, understanding, and acting upon the voice and experiences of the child is a key design principle of the Children First service improvements.

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Appendix 1: Performance Summary Report to Children First Improvement Board, 25 February 2021, covering the period to the end of January 2021.