
West Sussex County Council's Children First Service Improvement Programme: Progress Report – March 2021

Introduction

- 1** I am providing a further update to all members to coincide with the County Council meeting on 19 March 2021. As this is the last full Council of the current administration, I thought it would be appropriate to pause to reflect on all the achievements of the service over the past year. Indeed, when I became Cabinet Member for Children and Young People in October 2019, I could scarcely have believed how far the service would come in the intervening period. That this has been achieved is a great credit to the service leadership, its staff, its partners, the children and families themselves – and to you the members of the Council, who have given such unwavering support to bring us through a challenging period, and to put our young people back where they belong – at the centre of our deliberations. We still have a very long way to go, but we now have a clear pathway to a more promising future.

The Children's Commissioner

- 2** The good feelings I have about the service improvement journey to date were echoed in the words of John Coughlan, the Children's Commissioner, when he addressed all members of the County Council on 22 February. Mr Coughlan was unsparing in his identification of the shortcomings he originally found in 2019, and rightly so; but equally his constructive challenge and support during 2020, and his inspirational chairmanship of our Children's Improvement Board, have provided strong impetus for genuine change and I salute him for this. Alongside, the expertise of Hampshire County Council as our partner in practice has given invaluable support in facing up to and tackling our service quality issues.
- 3** We are absolutely clear what further objectives our authority needs to achieve during 2021 in order to restore its pride and retain permanent independent control of the service. This is a sound position to be in and provides a firm base from which to move forward. The Commissioner has set out the judgement criteria he will use to assess our progress and I can confirm that these criteria have also been built into our own performance management processes and will be reported into the Improvement Board. 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.

Ofsted & the Department for Education (DfE)

- 4** Although the Ofsted inspection process continues to be disrupted by the pandemic, our strong performance during the Focused Visit in October demonstrates that we are able to evidence a clear trajectory of improvement at pace. The Ofsted Focused Visit in October gave encouraging messages and we are now preparing for a resumption of the quarterly Monitoring Visits, starting at the end of May 2021. So far as the DfE is concerned, the fact that the Minister was willing to suspend the Children's Trust process for 12 months, is a remarkable and unprecedented achievement, since a Trust is the default solution for authorities in our position.

Improving Governance

- 5** The Council has transformed its governance structures and processes in respect of children's services since I became Cabinet Member. This included establishing the

Executive Directorate for Children, Young People and Learning and cementing the statutory Lead Member and Director roles for Children's Services. Bringing together education with social care functions has been a major achievement, leading operationally to a genuinely symbiotic relationship between social workers and schools, which has paid dividends during the pandemic. The internal Scrutiny function has been greatly strengthened and I am grateful to both of our Chairmen, David Barling and latterly Stephen Hillier, for giving so much of their time and energy to this purpose. We have improved our partnership mechanisms through the Children First Board (a Sub-Group of the Health and Wellbeing Board); the Safeguarding Children Partnership has been reconfigured to modern standards and the Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP) goes from strength to strength. My thanks go to the CPP members for the dedication they have shown to their role. I would also particularly like to mention Councillor Oxlade and really appreciate the support and enthusiasm he brings as Vice-Chairman of the Panel. I am grateful to the Leader of the Council, to our Chief Executive, Becky Shaw, and of course to Lucy Butler, the Executive Director Children, Young People and Learning and her team, for their strong support throughout. It has been a pleasure to work closely with them all.

Meeting the Challenge of Covid-19

- 6** That so much has been achieved during a nationwide pandemic, when lockdown created so many additional challenges for vulnerable families and children and for our staff, has been nothing short of miraculous. All the evidence shows that children have been kept safe, with face-to-face contact as the default approach; staff have received the correct equipment, guidance, and support; performance has remained strong, with fluctuating demand being well handled. The strength of our relationship with schools has really shone through but we remain committed to improving the effectiveness of all of our partnership working. The vaccination programme for the frontline workforce is proceeding at pace and has been welcomed by our staff across the service. Everyone associated with the service should be really proud of these achievements.

Towards a New Service

- 7** Much of what has been achieved would not have been possible unless outstanding service leadership was in place. Our Executive Director, Lucy Butler, has, in a remarkably short time, created a capable, highly qualified and experienced management team to drive change through. I have always stressed that we are proceeding upon a long journey, which started from a low base and that transformative change takes time to embed and become the lived experience of the service. Therefore, I am very excited about the many improvements that we expect to deliver during the remainder of 2021. One of the first of these is that we will soon be starting to open new, state-of-the-art children's homes, of which this authority can be truly proud and I hope that when circumstances allow, other members will be able to visit them.

Designing the New Service

- 8** Each part of the service has been carefully examined as part of the redesign project, with staff closely involved. One of the key design features is that bringing a new Early Help service into much closer alignment with Social Care will address one of the greatest weaknesses that the service experienced in the past. This fresh, integrated approach will be supported by the Family Safeguarding model of practice, which will be progressively adopted within the service and become fully

functional in the early part of 2022. The new model aims to secure a better future for children by working to keep families together, using specialist skills to address the known causes of family breakdown. For the first time the service will have the tools and techniques to manage demand effectively, instead of merely responding to it. This will help a whole generation of children to find a better footing in life, safely within a nurturing family environment; it will also lead to a more effective use of scarce resources, both for this Council, and for our many partners.

A Rewarding Place to Work

- 9** All these changes can deliver a better service only through a workforce that is highly motivated, well-organised and properly equipped and rewarded. I am pleased to say that all of these elements are now coming into place. Following extensive preparatory work in which staff are closely involved, in July a new simplified staffing structure, alongside a competitive remuneration package (the Social Work Offer) will be rolled out. Our staff have stayed with us throughout these uncertain times and fully deserve the financial and professional development opportunities that they will now receive. A further benefit will be that everyone in the service will have much greater clarity about roles, responsibilities and sources of support, promising greater all-round efficiency.

The Voice & Involvement of Young People

- 10** One of my greatest pleasures as Cabinet Member has been to welcome our young people into discussions about service provision, knowing that decision makers are really listening and responding to what they have to tell us. The contribution of our Youth Cabinet has been exemplary, and it has been good to have young people representing their peers at meetings of the Scrutiny Committee, the Corporate Parenting Panel, and the Children First Board. I can see that the service is preparing to become fully child-centred in every aspect of its work and there can be no more worthwhile aspiration than that.

Summary

- 11** Whatever the future holds in store, I am confident that the children and young people of West Sussex will be well-served by the improvements we are implementing over the next year, and that it will lead to a better start in life for them. In the meantime, I thank all members for their help and support over the last year and look forward to continuing our good work for the children and families in our county.

For information

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Statement from the Chair of West Sussex Youth Cabinet

March 2021

Moving into March, the Youth Cabinet is as busy as ever. All of our campaigns are running at full speed, and plenty of new projects are starting up.

Our highly anticipated political engagement webinars invited people of all ages to participate in three nights of youth-led political education surrounding political understanding, ideologies and discourse. These webinars are only one of many facets the political campaign has alongside our weekly podcasts and soon a social media roll-out. With all aspects of the campaign gaining popularity, we're hoping to continue expanding the dialogue.

Following a review of the November debate, the youth cabinet is working with officers to produce a new series of podcasts and video resources to instigate and stimulate conversations around racial equality. The episodes will aim to discuss topical questions and matters to further our fight for equality.

The mental health campaign will be next to host a webinar. On 10 March, a 'Free Your Mind' session will discuss the stigma surrounding mental health. This is a step forward in the plan to revitalise the 'Free Your Mind' charity. We're hoping to utilise the insight we gained from a recent mental health consultation with multiple council and health service members.

Our environmental campaign is continuing to work with external organisations. Marine conservation, preserving pollinators and exploring green jobs are just some of their recent involvements.

The free university campaign has just completed its exploratory stage, capturing over 2,000 young people's attention. We hope to move forward by educating young people on their higher education options, both in choice and finance. Similarly, our domestic violence and homelessness campaigns are near completing their research. Rishi, our lead for domestic violence, will be speaking at an event to emphasise the need for victim support.

In other news, we are working with education liaisons to reform the pastoral curriculum. This follows our debate in November, but it will cover sexual education, prospects for the future, diversity and emotional intelligence.

Our most notable news is the national award we have been nominated for. The National Crimebeat Award recognised our 'Tackling knife crime' campaign, so in mid-March, we are presenting as a finalist in the hopes to gain such a phenomenal commendation.

As always, the youth cabinet will continue buzzing away. In the mind that this is the last update of this administration, we want to say thank you to every person who listened, endorsed or supported our work. Your assistance has been influential to many of our achievements.

Thank you, the West Sussex Youth Cabinet.