

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

30 June 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 10 March 2021. The report sets out the following:

- a) The latest position regarding external regulatory scrutiny of the service including the recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit and the Commissioner's Performance Framework. (Section 2).
- b) An account of the work in hand to undertake a programme of renewal and recovery in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (Section 3).
- c) A summary of recent service performance (Section 4).
- d) An update on the continuing Service Redesign process (Section 5).
- e) A digest of other service improvement projects (Section 6).

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 is addressing post-pandemic renewal and recovery.
- 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 Visit

- 2.1 The scrutiny of the service by Ofsted continued with a Monitoring Visit which occurred virtually on 18-19 May 2021. The purpose of this cycle of visits is to 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 visit demonstrated that the service is maintaining the required trajectory of improvement and as expected, indicated that much remains to be achieved. The inspectors were confident that the senior leadership team know the service well and concurred with our self-evaluation.
- 2.2 The focus of the Visit was on children achieving permanence in care. The official letter following the Visit was published on the Ofsted website on 23 June 2021. In summary, the inspectors found the following:
- West Sussex County Council is making steady progress in this area of practice.
 - Senior leaders have a realistic self-evaluation and clear understanding of how to improve. They have a good understanding of the weaknesses in the service and have a clear and coherent plan to focus on the necessary improvements.
 - Systems and oversight for children achieving permanence at the earliest opportunity have been strengthened, with the majority of children having a permanent plan at their second review.
 - An increased number of children are living with foster-to-adopt carers.
 - A greater number of children are secured in their living arrangements with permanent long-term foster carers.
 - Life story work is in place for children adopted to understand their history and identify; further work is required for all children not living with their birth families.
 - Effective oversight is in place through foster panels, the Adoption Decision Maker and permanence panels.
 - Despite this, social work practice is still variable in improving outcomes for children; the quality of assessments, outcomes planning and purposeful interventions, and management oversight and decision making all need to improve.
- 2.3 The Ofsted Annual Conversation occurred on 16 June. This is a regular and formal discussion between the regulator and all local authorities to assist the service to critically evaluate its own performance and articulate what it considers is working well for children in its area. It covers all aspects of the service, so includes the delivery and effectiveness of education as well as social care and early help. The meeting is used to give assurance that the local authority has the correct plans in place, and it contributes to planning for further service improvement.

Service Priorities

- 2.4 Key service improvement priorities continue to focus in these main areas:

- Delivering child-centred and strengths-based social work practice, particularly in assessments and outcomes-focused plans; and to ensure that all visits to children and families are timely and purposeful.
- Improving management oversight and accountability, and the quality of reflective supervision and practice in order to achieve sustainable change for children.
- Continuing to strengthen the permanent recruitment and retention of social workers, so children can benefit from fewer changes of social worker.
- Embedding the QA and audit process to consolidate learning and practice developments.

2.5 Ofsted Monitoring Visits will continue on a quarterly basis. The date of the next visit has now been agreed as 7/8 September 2021, and the focus will be on Children with Disabilities.

Children's Services Commissioner

- 2.6 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.
- 2.7 Throughout the Improvement process the Commissioner, John Coughlan has periodically briefed all members on the progress being made. The latest such briefing occurred on 4 June 2021. The Commissioner is expected to be making a formal review in July 2021 to enable him to report progress against his criteria, leading to a final recommendation on the future of the service, expected in December/January 2021/22.
- 2.8 The Commissioner's Trust decision criteria continue to form part of the Departmental monthly performance report cycle, ensuring that a regular focus is maintained on these issues and to provide the Commissioner with the relevant evidence to be able to recommend that the service be secured within the Council.

3 Post-pandemic Renewal and Recovery

- 3.1 Covid-19 and its aftermath have presented great challenges for all stakeholders of the service, including children and families, staff and the partner services. As previously reported to this Committee, the service has managed business during the pandemic effectively. Now there is a need to consolidate the learning achieved and the adaptation to new ways of working. To this end, a stakeholder group on Renewal and Recovery was set up in March 2021, chaired by Lucy Butler, Executive Director, to address these issues across the partnership. Membership includes partners such as

Health and Police. The purpose of the group is to consider how to reset the service in its broadest sense following the impacts of Covid-19 and ensure that the positive improvisations during the pandemic are consolidated. Topics for investigation include:

- Children & Families – Covid-19, not being in school, job losses.
- Staff – Coming back to the office, worries, anxiety and confidence.
- Mental Health – Staff, families, and children.
- Education issues.
- Poverty.

All stakeholders, including representative families and children have been surveyed as part of this exercise, and it is proposed that further updates are made to the Committee as this work unfolds.

Next steps on Renewal & Recovery

3.2 Activities in train can be summarised as follows:

- All children are now being seen face to face.
- Staff are able to return to the office should they wish, subject to risk assessment.
- All teams are working in Covid-safe ways in offices, with access to colleagues and managers for support.
- The service is contributing to the authority-wide project to reassess workspace, including office and meeting facilities.
- Improvements to IT are being made in order to provide customers, staff and partner colleagues with better facilities to support different configurations of in-person and on-line meetings.

4 Performance Summary

4.1 This section summarises the latest sequence of performance data relevant to overall service delivery, which the Committee has asked to be kept informed about. Appendix 1 contains key information up to the end of May 2021 given in graphic form, as reported to the Children First Improvement Board on 21 June.

4.2 The salient points are as follows:

Contacts and Referrals

- i) With the easing of lockdown, especially the reopening of schools from 8 March, it was expected that contacts and referrals would increase, and this has indeed been the case. The conversion rate between contacts and referrals remains stable, implying that the processes are being managed effectively, and benefit from the 'Single Front Door' introduced in January 2021. Timeliness has been maintained. The service has gained sound experience of handling fluctuating demand during 2020-21.

Child Protection (CP) Performance

- ii) The figures illustrate a robust service response in general, and a welcome reduction in overall CP numbers. Performance on statutory visits remains stable at 86%.

Children we Care for

- iii) The general picture again is one of stability, with statutory visiting in line with previous performance (87.5% within the correct timescale). Performance in this area was closely scrutinised by Ofsted in the recent Monitoring Visit and members of the Committee will be re-assured by the outcomes summary reference earlier in this report (1.3).

5 Service Redesign update

The Committee has received regular briefings on the various components of the Service Redesign programme, which all inter-relate and support the vision of a transformed service. The latest developments are summarised below.

Management Development Programme

- 5.1 The management development programme is one of the key elements related to providing effective oversight of the service. The programme that has been developed offers a significant investment in our managers; it responds effectively to the Ofsted report and the Commissioner's recommendations; and it supports the required changes in culture and practice needed to bring sustainable, long-lasting change to the service. The latest developments include an intensive training programme supported by an external agency, and progress can be summarised as follows:
- A total of 173 Service Leads, Group Managers and Practice Managers have been assessed, have had their feedback session and now have a personal development plan in place.
 - Managers have been supported to understand their strengths, skills and their areas for development.
 - Further staff cohorts will become part of this process up to April 2022, in Education, Commissioning, and for Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and Child Protection Advisors (CPAs).
 - Following on from the assessments, development training held with Service Leads, Group Managers and Practice Managers will run to October 2021.
 - This work will be complemented by regular engagement events between the senior leadership team and the different layers of management across the service, which will focus on providing the evidence required by the Commissioner that effective management capability is in place.

Family Safeguarding

- 5.2 Alongside these developments, the programme to roll out the Family Safeguarding Model has been progressed to ensure the new service goes live in early 2022. Its goal is to put children, young people and their families right at the heart of all service decisions, delivering services in a truly preventative, contextual manner, through multi-disciplinary teams, and the Committee has received detailed briefings in the recent past. As part of the implementation, preparations are being made to start a major training programme for all of our practitioners and managers in the Motivational Interviewing framework. This will commence in the Autumn.

Staffing Structure

- 5.3 In alignment with the above, and as previously reported to the Committee, a simplified staffing structure will be brought into place from July 2021. This will address one of the key recommendations of the Commissioner regarding the need for management layering.

Social Work Offer

- 5.4 The new Social Work Offer 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. As at the start of June, the take-up by eligible staff for the interim Recruitment and Retention package stood at 98%.

6 Other Service Improvement Updates

The following is a summary of other recent and forthcoming developments within the service improvement agenda, as at June 2021.

Residential Services Update

- 6.1 The Residential Improvement Programme continues to make sound progress with the latest developments as follows:
- 'Bright Star' (previously Cissbury Lodge) is now operational, with a number of children having had day visits in recent weeks and with overnight stays commencing during June.
 - 'Breakwater' (previously Seaside) awaits its initial Ofsted visit, expected in the latter part of June.
 - A Registered Manager has been appointed to May House (to be renamed later this year), who will start in post in August, when this home is expected to open.

Opening events for the new homes are being planned for July 2021, and all members will be invited when the dates are confirmed.

- 6.2 The design stage of Phase 2 of the Improvement Programme, comprising the refurbishment of Orchard House, High Trees and Teasel Close, continues. Construction is expected to run throughout 2022 and 2023, taking place in stages across the homes, so as to minimise the impact on service operation. Both Orchard House and High Trees have received 'outstanding' Ofsted ratings in their most recent inspections. Teasel Close has also very recently been inspected, and a positive judgement is anticipated when the final report is received; this will be confirmed verbally to the Committee if available at the meeting.

7 Issues for consideration by the Scrutiny Committee

- 7.1 The Committee is invited to note the progress outlined within this report and confirm that it is satisfied with the pace and quality of the improvement activity across the Children, Young People & Education Department.

8 Consultation

8.1 Not applicable – this is a report for information.

9 Risk Implications and Mitigations

9.1 A summary of the risk areas identified in the current risk log, and the associated mitigating factors, are given in the table below:

Risk Area	Examples of Mitigating Actions
The Covid-19 pandemic will 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 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 received at least their first vaccination. The service with partners is now addressing a Renewal & Recovery agenda (Section 3 refers). Satisfactory performance information endorses this position (Section 4 refers).
A surge in service demand due to the pandemic	An increase in demand across the service was expected due to the pandemic, which has impacted vulnerable children and families disproportionately. The service planned for these factors in advance, and the situation is under control. 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 Improvement, to Performance Management, Governance, Scrutiny and use of Technology: it is a whole-system issue. The service transformation work will further enhance outcomes in the round. The regular Ofsted scrutiny and DfE intervention, together with the views of the Commissioner and the partner in practice provide external assurance of improved service stability in this respect.
Understanding and applying quality practice as a prerequisite to service improvement	A Practice Improvement Plan is in place to implement quality standards and assurance, and will increase in effectiveness in a

Risk Area	Examples of Mitigating Actions
	redesigned workforce with a new service delivery model.
The imperative for multi-agency capacity and capability	The joint undertakings with partners are very strongly stressed in the design principles of the intended changes, and the departmental leadership team works with key partners to develop a joined-up approach to service delivery. Family Safeguarding also 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. Ofsted feedback continues to 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 from other authorities for their services	This risk is comprehensively addressed in the Service Redesign proposals and the Social Work Offer provisions. Positive feedback has been received from staff engagement exercises.
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.
Risk of 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

Risk Area	Examples of Mitigating Actions
	learned from managing Covid-19 about more effective use of technology and further improvements are being sought as part of the Renewal and Recovery agenda.
Preparedness for cycle of Ofsted monitoring visits	The senior leadership team maintains regular Ofsted readiness meetings to plan and coordinate the work throughout the service. The successful Ofsted Focused Visit demonstrates that these processes are effective.

10 Other Options Considered

10.1 Not applicable – this is a report for information.

11 Equality Duty

- 11.1 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.
- 11.2 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.

12 Social Value

- 12.1 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.

13 Crime and Disorder Implications

- 13.1 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.

14. Human Rights Implications

- 14.1 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.

- 14.2 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.

Lucy Butler

Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning

Contact:

Vince Clark, Children First Transformation Director

Appendix 1: Performance Summary Report to Children First Improvement Board, 21 June 2021, covering the period to the end of May 2021.

Background Papers: None