

## **Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee**

20 July 2021 – At a virtual meeting of the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee held at 10.30 am.

Present: Cllr Hillier (Chairman)

Cllr Linehan  
Cllr Baldwin  
Cllr Bennett  
Cllr Burgess  
Cllr Charles

Cllr Cherry  
Cllr Cornell  
Cllr Hall  
Cllr Mercer  
Cllr Smith

Cllr Sparkes  
Mrs Hill  
Mr Lozzi  
Mr Cristin

Apologies were received from Mrs Ryan

Also in attendance: Cllr Russell

### **13. Declarations of Interests**

13.1 In accordance with the County Council's code of conduct, the following declarations of interest were made for Item 3 Early Help Service Redesign Proposals:

- Cllr Baldwin declared a personal interest as a member at Horsham Borough Council.
- Cllr Burgess declared a personal interest as a member at Crawley Borough Council.
- Cllr Hillier declared a personal interest as a member at Mid Sussex District Council and Cabinet Member for Economic Growth there.
- Cllr Sparkes declared a personal interest as a member at Worthing Borough Council and Cabinet Member for Resources there.

### **14. Urgent Matters**

14.1 No urgent matters were raised.

### **15. Early Help Service Redesign Proposals**

15.1 The Committee considered a report by the Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning on the revised Early Help Service redesign proposals following the public consultation.

15.2 The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People recapped that in the previous seven months since the scrutiny committee had reviewed the initial proposals there had been extensive consultation with a good response rate, which had shaped the amended proposals.

15.3 The Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning, Mrs Butler, introduced the item which would invite the Committee to review the outcome of the public consultation and provide recommendations to Cabinet on the final proposals prior to a decision being taken. Common themes had emerged on consultation timing, Covid-19 and demographic issues in rural and growth areas.

15.4 The Assistant Director – Social Care, Ms Boyd reported the use of one manager, the launch of one front door, the introduction of the Children Safeguarding Model would all help align services and allow much closer working with children and families in the community.

15.5 The Service Lead for Early Help, Ms Hayes, reported that high demand over the last year had seen a significant impact on the number of children waiting for service. Demand was reported to be currently outstripping resource and staff were working under pressure. The staff had mobilised well during the pandemic but pressures on them were unsustainable and a conclusion to the proposal was sought by staff.

15.6 The Committee asked the questions and received answers under the following headings:

### **Identifying those needing support**

15.7 How are vulnerable children identified and come to the service? There was strong engagement with partners in health and schools and very low numbers of referrals were made through Children and Family Centres. During the pandemic families were still making contact with the service. Part of the proposals were to improve regular contact with schools as often cases were picked up there. The integrated front door was available for any type of concerns.

15.8 Named Link Workers in schools – How would this work in practice and what additional training would be provided? It was anticipated that each area would have a dedicated proactive team which would work flexibly so any member of the team could pick up with a school to provide an enhanced service. Team size would depend on the area. The work of the teams would be reviewed by practitioners who already worked closely with schools.

15.9 How were Electively Home Educated children being identified as vulnerable? Any child moving to home education is notified to the Education and Skills service and their Pupil Entitlement team already worked with Early Help to ensure this cohort did not get missed.

15.10 How do people in need find out about the Early Help service in times of need? There is a lot of information available through health providers, online, word of mouth and advisory boards. Members expressed that they would be keen to help get information out into communities.

15.11 The report seemed to be based during the Covid-19 period would it be better to allow things to settle down? The data used for the proposal was for the three years prior to the pandemic. Whilst resources coped with demand at the time the pandemic strengthened the view that there was a need to change and modernise the Early Help offer. To assist that research from tried and tested models, e.g. Hampshire which had very similar demographics to West Sussex, were reviewed to try and develop a more community facing model across Early Help and Children's Social Care. The Committee questioned whether Hampshire's Ofsted Outstanding rating validated the impact of the changes they had made to their Early

Help offer. It was confirmed that the Ofsted rating was provided for the whole of Children's Services, which included Early Help, and all areas would have needed to be rated at Outstanding for the judgement to be given.

15.12 If service users' needs had doubled, how is making the service smaller and more targeted going to sit with people who go from coping to crisis? When the Children and Family centres closed in March 2020, centre-based staff were mobilised into the community. People still made contact even with the centres closed, a record number of food parcels were organised, crisis support payments and wider support were provided. There may still be a hidden demand but the fact that services were contacted and accessed during such difficult times was seen as positive.

### **Access to Services and Communications Plan**

15.13 How is need going to be identified for support groups? Issues in the communities can lead to a presence in schools and lead to sessions being run in the community. If a community seems to have the same issues, support can be provided to them as a group.

15.14 The proposed list of retained centres leaves a swath of the county from Midhurst to Henfield without a retained service, can you reassure that nobody living in those areas will be unable to reach the service? The Committee were reassured that all residents across the County would have equal access to services. Although the centres are focused on the areas of highest deprivation, three-quarters of our work is already out in the community with staff visiting those who need us.

15.15 The proposal has no talk of prevention, i.e. leading to more expensive intervention in later years from Children's Services? The entire proposal centres around prevention by giving the right level of support to families at the right time in the most flexible way to prevent later intervention by Children's Services.

15.16 Where is the communications plan? A detailed communications plan would be drawn up if Cabinet agree the proposals. The plan would have a strong emphasis on inclusion, ensuring language was not a barrier, and ensuring residents were aware of how they can access services in future, what is different and what it means for them.

15.17 Will the availability of sensory rooms in centres continue? There were some sensory rooms in centres proposed to be retained although it may not always be possible. Sensory Toy Libraries would be retained at each centre as these toys are expensive and good quality toys are in high demand. Some community libraries would also continue to have toy libraries.

15.18 We are proposing to remove the Early Help Offer from some buildings where we lease space. Can a community asset continue to be used by others? Community assets can continue to be used including libraries. There will be a Find It out Centre in every Children and Family Centre following feedback from young people, backed up by daily appointments in the community.

## **Post Implementation Monitoring**

15.19 Will the service develop its own method of monitoring the offer for both short- and long-term targets? The Council Plan has a robust set of corporate measures with a four-year target which enable the service to monitor and track progress against clear outcomes. This is backed up by a Directorate plan and a locality service plan. Additionally, Ofsted would monitor progress. There would be constant internal evaluation of the service as it is not a static thing and resources may need to be moved and the service changed in line with partners as we move forward.

## **Covid and Mental Health impact considerations**

15.20 During the pandemic did service users find it easier to make contact through other means rather than visiting centres? Accessibility had been key for the last year and young people preferred digital/virtual methods. Good promotion had helped but the service was looking to build on what had been learnt. People should be able to make contact through a website, on the phone, or use the approach suited them.

15.21 What plans are in place to address mental health issues? Currently when the service deal with a family, they undertake a whole family health assessment which covers things from dental health to mental health so that we can help them with support on all areas. This will be continued in the new model. Mental Health work is an area of national concern and a multi-agency response that the service have been co-ordinating.

## **Government and Independent Reports**

15.22 In light of the recent Leadsom Review is the County Council wrong to be reducing the number of hubs? The current 43 centres do not operate as hubs but the 12 in the proposal will.

## **Consultation Outcomes**

15.23 If 76% of consultation responders were strongly against the proposals, why is the customer wrong and the proposers right? The views of the responders were not dismissed but some did seem to be confused with Early Years services. Comments were drawn together, and some significant changes were made to the proposal, such as an additional centre, retaining some groups and face to face support for those who could not get to a centre.

15.24 As the consultation was carried out during lockdown, are we sure everyone who wanted to, particularly those in digital poverty, had the opportunity to take part? Every reasonable attempt was made to ensure participation including advertising in schools, library, supermarkets, news outlets, postcards, community noticeboards, contacting service users, key groups and social media, with translations into several languages. Extra effort was put into areas of low response. The process was quality assured by the Director of Law and Assurance to ensure due process was followed.

## **Partners' Impact and Considerations**

15.25 Can we have reassurance that co-located services will continue at areas where we are closing centres? That reassurance could not be given but staff were working with the Health Child Partnership, midwifery partners, etc, to understand and support their needs. Many services were considering how they could do things differently in future.

15.26 What support is proposed for voluntary- and parent-led groups in our centres? The provision of safe high-quality environments to help them deliver their groups, supporting safeguarding worries, support in how best to deliver their groups and ensuring there is someone on the property to support a safe space.

## **Staff Considerations**

15.27 Has consideration been given to the increased risk to staff if a family was attending a Children and Family Centre? Reassurance was given that safe working is normal practice for Early Help staff. There are Lone Working policies, processes and assessments for families all in place. None of that would change.

15.28 Would every effort be made to keep redundancies to a minimum? It was confirmed that over the last year a vacancy management process had been in place to ensure staff were not recruited unnecessarily and to work with staff who may be considered at risk. It had left the service stretched but had offered opportunities for staff to broaden horizons. Consequently 23 members of staff who would have been at risk had been promoted to other roles. The difference in whole time equivalent staff number was 315 before the redesign and 280 after (a 12.4% reduction).

15.29 Mrs Russell reminded the Committee that the redesign was to work in an agile way in the community and this was not savings exercise. If there were any other questions from the Committee after the meeting, she would be happy to receive them in writing and respond.

15.30 Councillors Cherry, Cornell, Mercer and Smith requested that their comments and suggestions which were presented to the Committee be noted. These were not supported by the rest of the Committee:

1. That the Early Years Redesign project implementation phase be suspended entirely for a minimum period of six months to allow:
  - The project be bought back to CYPSSC for thorough review to identify significant gaps in the existing evidence and provide detailed recommendations on tests which should be met before full implementation can proceed.
  - A full pilot be developed with a willing District, to provide robust evidence and data relating to the benefits, the risks, the impact and the measurable outcomes before any further move to a County wide implementation.
  - A more thorough assessment be made of the overall picture from other authorities where such service changes have been

implemented, to include the comparability of their starting position, their outcome measures, and their project timescale.

2. In spite of over three quarters of user respondents to the consultation strongly rejecting the re-design proposals, their views have been dismissed on the unsubstantiated premise that they did not understand the service they were using. In addition, many committee members felt the consultation to be flawed. Therefore the consultation must be re-designed and re run to ensure service users are fully engaged with and listened to, in line with this authorities stated objectives.

15.31 Resolved – That the Committee:

1. Raised various concerns on the Early Help Redesign proposals as set out in the minutes and conclusions, but recognises the need to drive forward the service's improvement journey and that the Early Help proposals are considered to be a key part of that ambition.
2. Highlighted a particular concern over the ability to identify and address the needs of vulnerable children and families and that the Cabinet Member must be assured that there are sufficient resources to work with schools, other partners and early years settings to identify these at an early stage for the aims of the service to be realised.
3. Requests that there is constant, clear and detailed monitoring of the impact of the new proposals, including the identification of vulnerable children and families, and effective access to services, so that any unintended adverse consequences can be identified and addressed at an early stage and that there is evidence-based assurance that the key outcomes of the service and its new model are being met.
4. Highlights the importance of a robust and wide-reaching communications and engagement plan as part of the implementation of the proposals so that residents and partners know how to access services. The Committee requests that the proposed content of the communications plan is considered by Cabinet on 27 July and that members are engaged with its development so as to gain necessary assurance for residents' ability to access the service.
5. Requests that it receives a report to review the impact of the new model after 12 months of implementation, which includes feedback from service users and partners and evidence on how it is delivering improved outcomes for vulnerable children and families.
6. Asks that the Cabinet Member for Finance and Property prioritises, as a matter of urgency, the work with partners and voluntary and

community groups to explore opportunities to utilise centres, or to find other solutions, where early help propose to withdraw, recognising the concern raised by residents on the potential reduction in access to universal services provided by those partners and other groups. The Committee also asks that there is member engagement in any future review of the relevant County Council assets and that this is considered by the appropriate scrutiny committee at the right time.

7. Thanks the public for their input, suggestions and views into the consultation and welcome the engagement with young people to capture their views which have greatly helped the committee in its consideration of the proposals.

15.32 Councillors Cherry, Cornell, Mercer and Smith requested that the record show they did not support the conclusions set out above.

## **16. Requests for Call-In**

16.1 There had been no request for call-in to the Scrutiny Committee within its constitutional remit since the date of the last meeting.

## **17. Date of Next Meeting**

17.1 The next meeting of the Committee would be on 29 September 2021.

17.2 Any member wishing to place an item on the agenda for the meeting must notify the Director of Law and Assurance by 12 September 2021.

The meeting ended at 1.26 pm

Chairman