

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

9 March 2022

Children's First Improvement – Update Report

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 12 January 2022. The report sets out the following:

- a) The latest position regarding external regulatory scrutiny of the service, including the situation regarding a Children's Trust, and the forthcoming Ofsted Monitoring Visit.
- b) The introduction of the Family Safeguarding Model within the service from 1 February 2022 is described.
- c) The progress towards a single integrated information system is explained, alongside other recent service developments.
- d) The Appendix contains the latest available performance summary, to 31 January 2022.

The focus for scrutiny

The Committee is asked to scrutinise the progress made on the Children First Improvement Programme, as set out in this report, and whether this provides assurance that the objectives for improved outcomes for children and young people will be met.

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

Introduction

1. Background and Context

- 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. Any further updates will be provided verbally at the meeting.

2. Analysis/Discussion

Children's Trust

- 2.1 The Committee is aware that the Commissioner for Children's Services in West Sussex, John Coughlan recommended to the Department for Education (DfE) in October 2020 that the progress towards an independent Children's Trust for the governance of the service should be paused for one year. This recognised the improvements in corporate governance and service delivery that the Commissioner had already identified at that time, and his expectations of further progress during 2021. A statutory direction to the County Council from the Secretary of State for Education on 10 December 2020 gave effect to this provision. The Commissioner subsequently published the criteria by which he would form his assessment during the intermediate year, 2021, prior to his further recommendation to the DfE on the future of the service.
- 2.2 With the expiry of the year in question, the Commissioner has made a further submission to the DfE, with his recommendation for the future governance of West Sussex Children's Services. This was supported by a dossier of evidence provided by the service and presented to the Commissioner and the DfE in December 2021. The evidence base demonstrated significant and consistent improvement across all the Commissioner's measures and it was well received. The formal decision of the DfE on the future governance of West Sussex Children's Services is expected in early March 2022.

Ofsted Monitoring Visit, March 2022

- 2.3 As part of its oversight of the improvement programme, Ofsted instituted a regular cycle of Monitoring Visits, which took place in May and September 2021. The next such Visit is scheduled to occur in the last week of March 2022. Ofsted has signified that this Visit will focus on Children we Care for and will also look closely at the Voice and Participation work being done within the service. At its previous meeting on 12 January 2022, this Committee received a report on Children we Care for, in anticipation of the Visit. The senior leadership team expect this Monitoring Visit to confirm further improvements in this part of the service. The outcomes of the Monitoring Visit will be reported to the next meeting of the Committee.

Current Management Self-Assessment

- 2.4 Ofsted has repeatedly acknowledged through its findings during the improvement programme that the senior leadership team has a sound and realistic view of the progress being made, and what further work is required. The key elements of the current self-evaluation are as follows:
- Improved participation of children and their families, the Children in Care Council (CiCC) and Care Leavers Advisory Board is being demonstrated in the design and delivery of services – including through positive feedback from children themselves.
 - The Corporate Parenting Panel now includes children as members and attendees, so that they are enabled to influence the conduct of business

and to provide feedback: this is a positive development, consistent with best practice.

- With regard to the quality of practice within the service, the Quality Assurance Framework is now better embedded; compliance and consistency of audits are much improved and audit moderations show improved practice for children. The Voice of the Child is being piloted in audits, starting in February/March 2022.
- Feedback from staff engagement is that the culture is changing in a positive way, and that leaders and managers are working better together as one service.
- Action to address entrenched areas of under-performance, such as Initial Health Assessments, and Unregulated Connected Carers placements is in progress, but has still to show the desired impact.

Areas for Further Development

2.5 Current management focus is being given to the following:

- To embed participation, listening and capturing the wishes and feelings of children more comprehensively throughout the work of the service.
- Consolidating child-centred practice for Children we Care for.
- Improving placement choice and sufficiency for children – that is, having enough of the right accommodation and services, in the right places and at the right quality, to effectively support children, young people and families within the county.
- Promoting contact and family time, and relationships and connections with family and friends.
- Improving transition points for children, so that they experience a stable and supportive service journey.
- Embedding the Family Safeguarding Model to ensure quality of practice is enhanced and sustained.
- Developing and embedding new initiatives to support children who are vulnerable to entering the care system, to be able to avoid doing so with safety.
- Continuing to focus on staff recruitment and retention across the service.

Family Safeguarding Model

2.6 The Committee has been kept informed during 2021 of the intention to adopt the Family Safeguarding Model (FSM), and the benefits of doing so. This is an evidence-based approach that addresses the needs of the whole family, supporting its functionality and enabling children to remain safely within it. Maintaining the integrity of families means that fewer children will need to be taken into care, which in turn assists the County Council to manage otherwise potentially unsustainable costs.

2.7 The first phase of the Family Safeguarding model (FSM) was officially launched within the service to the agreed timetable on 1 February 2022. To support the new model, a restructure of staffing has led to the creation of Assessment and Family Safeguarding teams based on three geographic areas: West (equivalent to Chichester and Arun district areas), Central (Worthing, Adur and Horsham) and East (Crawley and Mid Sussex). A new Supervision system has been introduced concurrently, to provide the best

support to staff and maintain improvements in practice standards. Further developments of the FSM will follow during Autumn 2022 to introduce adult practitioners within the Model, covering mental health, substance misuse and domestic violence services: these components, provided through the Council's strategic partners will support families to maintain their integrity and provide a nurturing environment for their children. It is intended to evaluate FSM progress regularly and report the position to this Committee in the Autumn.

Information Systems: towards transformation

2.8 Accurate, appropriate and secure information being available to practitioners in a consistent and timely way, is an essential part of the services that the County Council and its partners provide to children, young people and their families. One of the key challenges facing the service has been the plurality of information systems: the Children, Young People and Learning Directorate currently has 11 separate systems where information about children is recorded, from a total of 6 different suppliers. This creates difficulties around enabling workers to have sight of all information about a child in a single accessible location, as well as significant inefficiencies through duplication. A project to consolidate these recording systems is now being taken forward to the commissioning phase. The key stages have been as follows:

- In August 2021, the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Learning approved the commencement of a procurement to find a solution which would consolidate and integrate systems used to record information about children and their families.
- Potential suppliers were notified of the opportunity to tender via the Crown Commercial Services (CCS) Digital MarketPlace, and tender submissions were received in early January 2022.
- The evaluation team was made up of representatives from across the Council, including IT, procurement, data and performance and service areas across Children's Services.
- The evaluation process has been completed, and the Executive Director for Children, Young People and Learning will be asked to approve an award of contract to the preferred supplier in March 2022.
- The contract will commence on 1 April 2022 for an initial period of 2 years, with an option to extend by up to 2 years. The implementation project will involve significant resource from across the Council for a period of 18 months. This will include business input, IT resource, training costs and project management.

Rationalising data systems in this way will offer a major benefit to children, young people and families across the whole Children, Young People and Learning Directorate, in terms of the better coordination of evidence-based services delivered to them.

Youth Justice Inspection, March 2022

2.9 The Committee is asked to note that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation will be conducting an inspection of the Youth Justice Service from 14-18 March 2022. This County Council service sits within Children's Social Care. The Youth Justice Service works closely with partners, including the courts,

police, schools, colleges, district and borough councils and the voluntary sector to prevent youth offending and reduce reoffending by children in West Sussex. This inspection will be a welcome opportunity for the service to showcase the preventative work it is doing to minimise the number of children entering the criminal justice system and to promote their best outcomes in terms of safety, education and wellbeing. The results of this inspection will be reported to the Committee when available.

SESLIP Peer Challenge, February 2022

- 2.10 Members of the senior leadership team attended a peer challenge event with colleagues from Portsmouth and Kent on 11 February 2022. This was organised through SESLIP, the Southeast Sector-led Improvement Programme, an association of all top-tier and unitary authorities in South East England, whose purpose is to promote improvement and constructive challenge in children’s services. This allowed the service to contextualise and test its progress to date and plans for the future against its peers, and affords a further example of challenge that is valuable in ensuring that the momentum of service improvement is maintained against regional standards and for the sharing of best practice.

3. Resources

- 3.1 Costs for the activities described in this report, including those for the commissioning of a new information system, remain within the approved budget envelope. The Committee will note that the aspiration towards family stability and a reduction in the number of children taken into care are expected to assist the County Council to manage the costs of children’s social care more effectively into the future. The Family Safeguarding Model of prevention offers demonstrable benefits in reducing high-end costs to both local authorities and their partners.

Factors taken into account

4. Issues for consideration by the Scrutiny Committee

- 4.1 The Committee is invited to consider 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 & Learning Directorate to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people in West Sussex.

5. Consultation

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

6. Risk Implications and Mitigations

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
Risks to the autonomy or integrity of the service in	All the regulatory activity so far undertaken indicates that the service continues to make

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
relation to external governance processes	satisfactory progress against the expectations of external regulators (DfE, Ofsted, the Commissioner). The original reasons for proposing a Children’s Trust as a solution to the service’s problems in 2019 do not appear to remain applicable in 2022. The position will be reassessed once the formal decision of the DfE is known.
Risks to the ability to sustain the progress made to date	The service has demonstrated improvement in all the areas originally identified by Ofsted and the Commissioner, and this has been acknowledged. Service management, human resources, professional practice, infrastructure and culture are being transformed in a manner that is expected to be fully sustainable. The County Council has continued to ensure that the improvement programme is adequately resourced. This approach is supported by initiatives such as the Family Safeguarding Model and the introduction of comprehensive and integrated information systems. An appetite for change has been manifested, and a determination to deliver good services to children and families in West Sussex.

7 Other Options Considered

7.1 Not applicable – this is a report for information.

8 Equality Duty

8.1 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.

8.2 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.

9 Social Value

9.1 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.

10 Crime and Disorder Implications

- 10.1 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.

11 Human Rights Implications

- 11.1 The County Council has an overriding duty to safeguard the Human Rights of children and young persons in its area, 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.
- 11.2 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. The Council will continue to ensure it fulfils all its statutory duties regarding meeting the needs of children and young persons in its area during the Children First service transformation programme.

Lucy Butler,

Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning

Contact: Vince Clark, Children First Transformation Director

Appendix 1: Performance Summary to 31 January 2022

Background Papers: None