

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

16 November 2022 – At a meeting of the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee held at 10.00 am at County Hall, Chichester, PO19 1RQ.

Present: Cllr Linehan (Chairman)

Cllr Burgess	Cllr McGregor	Cllr Sparkes
Cllr Cherry	Cllr Mercer	Mr Cristin
Cllr Cornell	Cllr Payne	Mrs Oldroyd
Cllr Duncton	Cllr Smith	Cllr Evans

Apologies were received from Cllr Baldwin, Cllr Hall and Mr Gurling

Also in attendance: Cllr N Jupp and Cllr Russell

25. Declarations of Interests

25.1 In accordance with the County Council's code of conduct the following declarations were made:

25.2 Cllr Burgess declared a personal interest as a councillor at Crawley Borough Council under agenda item 6.

25.3 Cllr Cherry declared a personal interest as the chair of governors at the Burgess Hill Academy under agenda item 6.

25.4 Cllr Mercer declared a personal interest as the chair of the Orchard Hill Academy Trust under agenda item 6.

26. Urgent Matters

26.1 No urgent matters were raised.

27. Children First Improvement Programme - progress, current position and next steps

27.1 The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Cllr Russell, introduced the report by reflecting on the journey Children's Services had been through since 2019 and that it was a timely point to reflect on the progress made to date, with a full Ofsted inspection due between now and spring 2023. The report outlined all key areas of progress and work undertaken and outlined changes and transformation and the impact of those changes.

27.2 The Committee received a statement from Mr Coughlan, the independent chair of the Improvement Board and previously the Commissioner for Children's Services in West Sussex. Mr Coughlan reminded the Committee that the County Council had found itself rated as inadequate following a long period of fragility in Children's Services. The

first ever rescindment of a trust order by the DfE was a credit to the people involved in improving the service, particularly as it was during the early pandemic period. The cost-of-living crisis compacting after 10 years of austerity and a national recruitment crisis were national issues providing additional challenge to the improvement journey, but Mr Coughlan felt that the County Council had coped admirably.

27.3 Mr Coughlan felt confident around the work being done by the Improvement Board. He felt the chain of command and accountability in the County Council was stronger now, particularly through the Chief Executive and Director of Children, Young People and Learning and the management team, and this gave him confidence. He noted that the service was now awaiting a full inspection at any point within the next four months and that would be a critical milestone for the service.

27.4 Mr Coughlan reported that Ofsted inspections were primarily focussed on cases and case outcomes. Through support with Hampshire County Council as practice partner, a stronger model of self-audit and self-evaluation had been developed in West Sussex.

27.5 For the future Mr Coughlan reported there have been challenges with the pace and consistency of high-quality practice in what is a relatively large county. Driving at that consistency is now a core management priority. He also noted the reduction in funding from the Department for Education (DfE) for the new practice model, recruitment of social workers and other suitably qualified staff. The senior management team needed to be supported as they prepared for the full inspection, the Committee needed to carry on the much-improved tone of scrutiny going forward by getting the balance of support and challenge right.

27.6 Members of the Committee asked questions of Mr Coughlan and officers and a summary of those questions and answers follows.

27.7 The effectiveness of the Scrutiny Committee today is light years away from the position in 2019. Areas of interactions with members, the Leader and cabinet members is much better. Work of the Improvement Board and Corporate Parenting Panel is collaborative and transparent. The Scrutiny Committee could help officers more by challenging volatility in figures in quality assurance rather than scrutinising case outcomes. It takes a long time to turn a children's service department around, and even more so in a period of national recruitment and cost of living challenges.

27.8 Support for **16- and 17-year-olds presenting as homeless** had been highlighted by Ofsted several times through the monitoring visits. Since the Ofsted report the Youth Homelessness Team had been moved under the Integrated Front Door (IFD) and the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) service with a new line management and focus and with greater support of social workers. Issues raised by Ofsted had changed over the years and more recently focussed on the quality of accommodation. The responsibility for accommodation had been held by the corporate Home Housing Team. From 1 December 2022 that team would move to the Children's Commissioning team which would improve matters through increased quality assurance and greater monitoring and oversight.

27.9 The **Family Safeguarding Model** is a very flexible model that could be adjusted to fit local circumstances. The service is committed to the model with a reduced number of workers whilst continuing to lobby the Department for Education (DFE) for additional funding. It was hoped to be able to feed back on the benefits of the new model to the Scrutiny Committee in June 2023.

27.10 Work was underway to increase **IT efficiency** and streamline the systems and services used. The Committee asked that the Business Planning Group monitor progress at its next meeting to see if there were any areas for scrutiny.

27.11 The **recruitment of social workers** from South Africa had been an option because the social work model there was very similar to that of the United Kingdom. It was intended to revisit in the New Year for another round of recruitment. It was important to reduce the number of agency staff used and increase the permanent staff as they would be inducted into the culture of the service and take forward good practice. Our social worker offer is benchmarked against other authorities to ensure West Sussex is in the top quartile.

27.12 Since February 2021 the **Integrated Front Door** (IFD) had helped improve integration between early help and social workers. The streamlining of responses was much better and there had been more positive feedback from partners. The data on response times and referrals was consistently over 95%. The IFD and MASH had been reviewed by a peer partner and there had been a positive response.

27.13 There had been an anomaly in September 2022 when a high number of children came off **Child Protection Plans** at the first review (i.e. after 3 months). There had been an investigation into those cases to see why. It is a multi-agency decision but if a conference or reviewing officer chairs a meeting and thought a child is likely to come off at first review, they will discuss with the service manager and social worker.

27.14 The **Quality Assurance** process feeds into improving practice by a monthly collaborative audit with social workers and team managers looking at reflections and learning. The analysis of all the audits are moderated monthly and themes arising picked out. Learning is fed back into the system.

27.15 The expectation is that young people were kept informed of delays in allocation and changes to their social worker, however there had been occasions when that had not happened in the way we would have wanted. In this event the team manager stepped in and apologies were given. If there were gaps identified then young people were made aware of other partners e.g. school, health, who they could contact.

27.16 Scrutiny around **timeliness of visits**, and an action plan showed an improving picture. Weekly dashboards were provided for team managers so they could plan visits and cleanse data to ensure it was reported correctly.

27.17 Cllr Russell took over the Chairman's role on the Corporate Parenting Panel in 2019 and, following the appointment of Mr Ruaux, and the involvement of young people from the Children in Care Council (CiCC) and Care Leaver's Advisory Board (CLAB) had embedded **the voice of young people** in the work of the Panel and its sub-groups. The Chairs of the CiCC and CLAB also help co-chair the Panel. Children we Care for are also involved in the Improvement Board and the Youth Cabinet are also involved in County Council work.

27.18 Since October 2021 Conference and Reviewing officers had undertaken children protection and children we care for work meetings. This had given more consistency for children who moved from child protection orders into being children we care for. The work had embedded the changes required and there was reassurance that it was now much better than it had been.

27.19 Over the summer period the service had struggled to allocate a small number of cases in a timely way. However, these issues had now been resolved and there were no unallocated cases. It had been acknowledged that the recruitment issues, that resulted in the allocation delays in the summer, were not acceptable and had been resolved. Those that were unallocated during the summer were risk assessed and closely monitored by a team manager until a key worker was in place.

27.20 Cllr Russell thanked Mr Coughlan and the Committee for their comments and questions. She valued the challenges raised by the scrutiny committee and highlighted that some of the key achievements including the social worker of the year award, youth justice award and the launch of the fostering website. She agreed to look at the request to access case studies with officers.

27.21 Resolved – That the Committee:

1. Recognises the huge amount of progress that has been made since October 2019 by the service to improve outcomes for children and young people.
2. Highlights that it is paramount that the pace and consistency of the improvement journey continues beyond the forthcoming Ofsted inspection to ensure that improvement is sustained, in particular around quality of practice.
3. Asks the Committee's Business Planning Group to consider the potential future scrutiny of quality assurance so that the Committee can continue to monitor and seek assurance that quality of practice is continuing to improve.
4. Will consider the impact of the Family Safeguarding Model in 2023 and would like to see how the benefits identified in the national model are being realised locally and feedback from children and families included within that item.

5. Recognises the impact of the national issue of recruitment and retention on the pace of the improvement journey and supports the continued focus on recruiting permanent staff.
6. Ask for a progress update on the IT implementation at its next Business Planning Group to consider if there are any areas for future scrutiny.
7. Will continue to monitor levels of unallocated cases, recognising the negative impact this has on children and young people.

28. Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee

28.1 Resolved – that the minutes of the meeting held on 28 September 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

29. Responses to Recommendations

29.1 The Committee noted the responses to the recommendations made at the meeting on 28 September 2022.

29.2 Members were asked to let the Chairman know if they would like to put their name forward to sit on the SEND Strategy Board.

29.3 The Chairman agreed to seek further updates on the recommendations around advice and support for schools and SEND families and work to identify children's needs early.

30. Performance and Resources Report 2022-2023 - Quarter 2 - July-September 2022

30.1 The Committee looked at the Performance and Resources Report – Quarter 2 – July-September 2022.

Children and Young People

30.2 The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Cllr Russell, introduced the report highlighting that the key performance indicators (KPIs) were looking positive but that there remained significant budget pressures.

30.3 Members of the committee asked questions and a summary of those questions and answers follows.

30.4 Measure 1 - Percentage of **re-referrals** within 12 months – The Head of the Integrated Front Door (IFD) and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) regularly checks the data and had not to date seen anything to suggest the rating was not appropriate. Practice partners had also carried out quality assurance activities and had not found any concerns. It was suggested that a briefing on the changes to the Supporting Families Criteria could be given to the Committee.

30.5 Measure 2 – Percentage of **Early Help Plans** closed with outcomes met – The 74% target was ambitious, it compared well with the national

benchmark but was higher than pre-pandemic. The drop was partly due to the effect of the pandemic on seeing families rather than staffing pressures, although there was continued difficulty in recruiting alternatively qualified staff in areas such as early help

30.6 Measure 7 – **Stability of children looked after placements** – The 10% target was out of the total number of children cared for. The national average is 10% and the County Council was currently exceeding that at 10.1%.

30.7 Measure 8 – **Percentage of care-leavers aged 17-21 who are in Employment, Education or Training** – The amber RAG rating on the 64.0% target would be on a par with national benchmarking and exceeding statistical neighbours. The County Council, as well as supporting various activities, had also ring-fenced two apprenticeship roles in the Voice and Participation team for care leavers.

30.8 **External residential placements** – The service acknowledge that there are too many children in external residential placements. The County Council had approximately 5% more than statistical neighbours, and work had taken place to publish a Placement Sufficiency Strategy and a placement recovery plan – this could be shared with the Committee. It was acknowledged nationally that there were insufficient residential placements available.

30.9 **Children with disability home care and transport costs** – Reassurance was given that where there were health-related elements monies would be sought from health organisations which could influence the potential overspend. Whilst this was happening children were still receiving the support they needed from County Council finances but there was a Disabilities Recovery Plan in place to help deal with pressures on the budget.

30.10 **Fostering Allowances Inflationary Pressure** – Officers were working with stakeholder groups of foster carers and were confident that, following the recent review of fees and allowances, and the addition to the inflationary uplift, foster carers would be fairly paid for their responsibilities and be supported.

30.11 Cllr Russell thanked the Scrutiny Committee for their questions and comments and said that the leadership team would be happy to answer any further questions outside of the meeting.

Learning and Skills

30.12 The Cabinet Member for Learning and Skills, Cllr N Jupp, introduced the report highlighting that some pressures on the portfolio continued.

30.13 Members of the Committee asked questions and a summary of those questions and answers follows.

30.14 The portfolio currently had 47 schemes in the **Capital Programme**, and with the current increases in costs were facing increased total costs. Cllr Jupp confirmed it was worrying that if money was pulled forward from

projects scheduled in the future that there would not be sufficient funds available for all schemes. The whole programme would be kept under review going forward. It was agreed to share details of all the schemes in the portfolio with the Scrutiny Committee.

30.15 Members were pleased at the results under measure 21 **GCSE results** following the first set of exams since the pandemic but asked what impact measure 27 (percentage standards at end of Key Stage 2) and measure 29 (attainment gap of disadvantaged pupils) would have on future GCSE results. Officers were able to reassure that schools were now back in a cycle of assessments and examinations that they were familiar with, and much of the support they had given pupils since returning from lock down had meant that for measure 27 current data was showed that the gap had shrunk further.

30.16 With 9 million adults nationally unable to read, meaning some children were leaving school without full literacy, were there figures for West Sussex and what was the approach to adult literacy? Officers said figures were available and agreed to provide a briefing to the Scrutiny Committee outside of the meeting.

30.17 The Chairman acknowledged on behalf the Committee that most of the measures on pages 53 and 55 were going in the right direction indicating that effective work was taking place. Cllr Jupp endorsed the comments.

30.18 Resolved – That the Committee:

Children and Young People:

1. Explores how and if it should look in more detail at further performance data to provide assurance of continued progress on the Children First Improvement Journey.
2. Sought assurance that the targets for the performance measures are ambitious enough and in line with national and regional benchmarks.
3. Asks that the Committee is provided with further details on the Supporting Families Project and the recent change to the criteria and how this impacts on the County Council.
4. Raises concern on the high number of children we care for in external residential placements and ask that the placement sufficiency strategy is shared with the Committee.

Learning and Skills:

5. Highlights the additional spending on the learning and skills capital projects and the pressure that this could cause on the capital budget, and ask to have sight of all the schemes within the Learning and Skills Capital Programme to see how they are progressing.

6. Raises concern over performance measure 27, recognising the impact of the covid pandemic and will monitor how this improves when more recent data is available in future quarterly reports.

7. Asks for details on the number of adults who are unable to read in West Sussex.

31. Work Programme Planning and Possible Items for Future Scrutiny

31.1 Resolved – That the Committee agreed the draft work programme prepared by the Business Planning Group following their meeting on 20 October 2022.

32. Requests for Call-In

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

33. Date of Next Meeting

33.1 The next meeting would be held on 18 January 2023 at 10.30am.

The meeting ended at 12.45 pm

Chairman