
Ofsted Inspection Judgement of Children's Services and the County Council's Children First Practice Improvement Plan: Progress Report

Introduction

- 1** This update report is one of a monthly sequence being made by the Cabinet Member to all members of the County Council. Its purpose is to keep members informed about the Council's response to the Ofsted 'Inadequate' judgement of Children's Services (May 2019) and to set out the progress being made in enacting the necessary service improvements. On a quarterly basis it is intended to provide a more comprehensive position statement.

The Children First Practice Improvement Plan

- 2** As a result of the Ofsted judgement, the County Council is required to produce an improvement plan, to be submitted to the Department for Education (DfE). The purpose of the plan is to demonstrate to the DfE that the Council has an effective and deliverable action plan, in collaboration with its partners, to address the areas that need to improve, and to demonstrate the capability and capacity to do so. Accordingly, the draft Children First Practice Improvement Plan has been moving through a scrutiny and approval process, and is scheduled for formal adoption on 31 July by the Cabinet Member. It will then be submitted to Ofsted and the DfE. Consultees have included the Children's Improvement Board, the Health and Wellbeing Board, the Corporate Parenting Panel, and the Children and Young People's Services Select Committee. On 17 July the Select Committee discussed the Improvement Plan and supported its adoption.

The Children's Commissioner and his Role

- 3** On 4 June the Secretary of State for Education appointed a Children's Commissioner for West Sussex, whose purpose is to assess whether the Council has the capability and capacity to improve the service. The Commissioner is John Coughlan, the Chief Executive of Hampshire County Council. The Commissioner and his staff are now actively engaged within West Sussex, to understand and evaluate the service, and to enter into a dialogue with all its stakeholders. To this end, the Member Day on 17 July was an opportunity for members to hear directly from the Commissioner about his role, the issues involved and the forward process. The Commissioner is due to report his findings back to the Secretary of State by 30 September.

Operational Progress to Improve Children's Services

- 4** The County Council had, prior to the Ofsted inspection, recognised and acknowledged weaknesses with its children's service. Corrective measures have been in progress since 2018, which have themselves contributed to the formulation of the Improvement Plan, in discussion with partners such as Health, schools, district and borough councils, and the Police. Notwithstanding the seriousness of the current situation, significant progress has been made, most especially in the critical area of strengthening our workforce, and at the same time reducing the high caseloads, delays in providing service, and other deficiencies that were noted in the Ofsted report.

A Strong Workforce

- 5** Having a fully resourced, skilled, supported and motivated workforce is the cornerstone of all the service improvement aspirations. Reducing unacceptably high caseloads through closing the vacancy gap is the most tangible expression of positive change being made in the service, and through the actions already being taken, caseloads have significantly reduced. The following are some key features of the work undertaken to date (as at 8 July):
- The vacancy gap has reduced from 18.5% in February to 7% in July; the intention is to maintain this progress;
 - This outcome is supported by a recruitment and retention offer, which has currently been taken up by 85% of eligible staff;
 - 75 FTE Agency Social Workers are in post to fill the remaining vacancy gap and support the reduction of caseloads, although reliance on this contingent will reduce as staffing and workloads are stabilized in the longer term;
 - The initiative in place for Newly Qualified Social Workers is demonstrating effectiveness, with the fresh intake of 41 NQSWs coming on-stream; seven new Apprentice Social Workers have also been recruited;
 - Good progress has been made with the management of sickness and other long-term staff absence.
- 6** Other key areas of support that are in progress or under development, include:
- Planning for further recruitment that will maintain the vacancy rate at the target of less than 10%;
 - Improving induction and supervision arrangements – a key aspect of ensuring staff effectiveness and wellbeing, as well as feeding into more robust performance management arrangements;
 - Putting measures into effect to ensure that staff can continue to develop their professional skills in a coherent and satisfying way;
 - Ensuring that Social Workers receive adequate administrative support.

An Investment Plan

- 7** It is necessarily the case that the County Council must identify additional financial resources to support the quest for improvement. An Investment Plan is therefore in development, which will be considered by Cabinet Members at the end of July. This will help to support the Council's evidence to the Commissioner of our intent to invest in good quality staffing and services, and explain the outcomes that will be achieved within the service and for its customers.

Next Steps

- 8** While the current focus has necessarily been on immediate operational change, and in formulating an activity plan for the next year, it is important to appreciate that there is a broader perspective of change required for our Young People's services, over the next two to three years. Accordingly, and supported by our partners, we are also in the process of constructing a Children First Strategy, which is intended to take effect in the autumn of 2019. This has a broader scope, to include the essential work undertaken by our Early Help service, and our review

of Residential services; it will take account of the County Council's aspirations for a locality-based service delivery model.

- 9 The Leader and I, in common with the whole Council, are resolute in our determination to maintain the progress to date, to adopt and deliver a robust plan for service transformation that satisfies the Commissioner, and to oversee a journey of change that will in due course give us a Children's Service of which we can justly be proud.

For information

Paul Marshall

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People