

Children and Young People's Services Select Committee

04 December 2019

Children First Improvement – Update Report

Report by the Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning

Summary

This report updates the Committee on developments in the Children First Programme since its last meeting on 23 October 2019. In particular it discusses the latest monitoring information on Workforce development, and the Improvement Plan topics of Privately Fostered and Homeless Young People.

The focus for scrutiny

The Select Committee is requested to:

1. note the latest position regarding the Commissioner's Report, and the commencement of a programme of Ofsted monitoring visits (1.1-1.2);
2. note the Leadership and Workforce improvement narrative (2.1-2.12);
3. note that a Performance report has been presented to the Business Planning Group on 25 November 2019 (3.1), which also considered a proposal for regular scrutiny of service improvement topics (3.2 & Appendix 1);
4. receive the current briefing on Assessment and Planning for Privately Fostered and Homeless Young People (3.3 & Appendix 2&3).

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

1. Introduction – Commissioner's Report and Ofsted

- 1.1 The Commissioner has completed his report, which has been received by the Department for Education (DfE). The main contents have been shared with the Leader, Cabinet and senior officers of the Council. However, due to the rules for government departments regarding pre-election business, it is not appropriate to publish the report until after the General Election on 12 December, or to discuss its contents in public.
- 1.2 As previously noted, the first Ofsted Monitoring visit is taking place on December 03-04. The inspectors are expected to focus on: the Assessment & Intervention function; the role of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO), whose function is to respond to allegations made against adults working with children; and the working of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH).

2. Update on Service Improvements

Leadership and Management in Children's Services

- 2.1 This report analyses in detail various measures to strengthen the Workforce. Equally important however, is the culture within which staff operate, and in particular how frontline staff are supported by management in their shared task of improving the lives of vulnerable children. This factor will be a key ingredient for overall success, and accordingly is high on the agenda of the Service Leadership Team. With this in mind, staff engagement sessions around the county during October-November have laid especial emphasis on encouraging staff at all levels to contribute to positive organisational change, and to enter into a constructive dialogue about how management can best support and value the workforce. In total, eight sessions have been held, at Worthing, Haywards Heath, Horsham, Bognor and Chichester, which were attended by a total of 312 staff. A good quality of input has been received, which is now being analysed.

Staffing - Vacancy Gap

- 2.2 The service currently comprises approximately 511 FTE (full-time equivalent) social worker posts. The vacancy gap describes posts where permanent staff are absent, as well as other posts without an agency worker cover. For this purpose measurement shows a steady decline from a baseline at February 2019, as follows:

February 2019	18.5%
May 2019	14.9%
June 2019	8.8%
July 2019	6.9%
August 2019	5.2%
September 2019	1.8%
October 2019	1.7%
November 2019	2.3%

- 2.3 The current vacancy gap corresponds to around 12 FTE posts. Vacancy gap predictions depend on a number of variables, and for this purpose it has been assumed (a) there are no more leavers than currently known (including those yet to opt into the Retention package); and (b) that all those programmed starters actually commence work. This calculation currently predicts staffing (including agency cover) at 0.1% *over*-establishment at the end of December 2019. It is intended to continue with more workers than posts until caseload levels and the provision to release staff for training and development is at a satisfactory level.
- 2.4 At the 'baseline' date of February 2019, there were typically around 7FTE leavers per month; this has now reduced by over 50%. This trend is indicative of a more stable workforce, but care is taken to understand and where relevant learn from the reasons for all departures. In the period to the end of January 2020 it is expected that starters will maintain a surplus over leavers.

Agency Workers

- 2.5 The vacancy gap has been closed in part through the engagement of additional agency resource: this means that the agency proportion is likely to fluctuate between given months due to specific demand; however the longer-term trend is intended to be downwards. The agency social worker contingent covering unfilled vacancies or undertaking additional work to help reduce caseloads, currently equates to just over 15% of the total qualified social worker establishment (511 FTE approx.); the recent detailed trend in terms of full-time agency workers, is as follows:

May 2019	62.0 FTE
June 2019	72.0 FTE
July 2019	75.0 FTE
August 2019	76.5 FTE
September 2019	73.7 FTE
October 2019	78.7 FTE
November 2019	78.7FTE

- 2.6 The use of high quality agency workers remains a key element of policy for the time being. Excluding agency workers from the Vacancy Gap calculation above would nominally increase the Gap to about 11%. The long-term intention is to progressively reduce use of agency staff through increasing the proportion of full-time staff.

Recruitment & Retention Offer

- 2.7 The take-up rate on the revised recruitment and retention offer refers to eligible social workers, (including some social workers within Early Help and Safeguarding, as well as Children's Social Care) committing to stay with WSCC for the next 18 months. The data excludes the ASYEs (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment, for newly qualified social workers) that became eligible for the provisions in September, many of whom have indicated a wish to be included. The current scheme was launched in June 2019, and the trend in rate of take-up is as follows:

July 2019	85%
August 2019	88.5%
September 2019	90.9%
October 2019	90.9%
November 2019	91.0%

- 2.8 A new recruitment campaign for permanent staff has been launched, under the headline: 'Be My Voice'. The interest and activity levels will be closely monitored, and outcomes will feature in further updates to the Committee.
- 2.9 To summarise, the positive effects previously reported are being sustained, and are indicative of a workforce becoming more stable. This journey of improvement needs to continue over the coming months for the benefits to become fully realised.

Caseloads

- 2.10 The Committee has already noted the centrality of achieving manageable caseloads across the service. Caseload targets were set in 2018 and were determined by comparing with other authorities rated as 'requiring improvement'. Targets will vary between different staff cohorts: experienced social workers have a target of up to 18 cases, while newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) have a reduced target of around 15 cases; lower levels will apply where cases are very complex and intense.
- 2.11 At the current time, four out of the eight social work teams are operating within the thresholds set. The exceptions are the Assessment & Intervention Teams (North & South), Adolescent Family Resource Team (South) and Family Support & Protection (North). All targets for NQSWs are being met.
- 2.12 Broadly speaking, the current position is acceptable in the context of a journey of improvement, and remains under close management review. It is important to continue to monitor over a longer time sequence in order to establish that full control over caseloads has been achieved.

3. Issues for consideration by the Select Committee

Performance Management

- 3.1 The Ofsted judgement of Children's Services made twelve main recommendations for improvements required by the service. In responding to the judgement, the County Council prepared a Practice Improvement Plan (PIP), which was endorsed by this Committee. The Plan comprises a range of structured improvement activities, combined with targets and measures to evidence improved performance. A detailed report on performance monitoring was taken to the Business Planning Group of this Committee on 25 November.

Detailed examination of key service areas

- 3.2 At its last meeting, the Committee agreed to receive a regular sequence of updates covering areas that were subject to the specific Ofsted recommendations mentioned above. It is thereby intended that members can gain in-depth knowledge of different aspects of the service and assure themselves that the Improvement Plan delivery is gathering momentum, with a clear trajectory for positive change. In following this structured approach, the Committee will be undertaking a similar journey to the Improvement Board, and the indicative topic schedule is given at Appendix 1. The Business Planning Group of this Committee discussed the programme on 25 November.

Privately Fostered & Homeless Young People

- 3.3 Private fostering is an important aspect of achieving good outcomes for some looked after children. The purpose of this programme is that, through training and profile-raising, social workers and partner agencies will be able

to recognise and respond to the specific needs of privately fostered children, ensuring good quality assessment of their needs; and that children will be placed in appropriate accommodation with the right support and knowledge of their rights and entitlements. This provision applies equally to care leavers presenting as homeless, including those aged over 18, with local authorities improving co-operation to ensure that their housing and other support needs are met. The work being undertaken is described in more detail in the reports at Appendix 2 & 3.

4. Consultation

4.1 Not applicable – this is a report for information.

5. Risk Implications and Mitigations

5.1 For an undertaking of this magnitude, it is natural that there will be a wide range of risks, both relating to the service improvement agenda and more widely. A summary of the risk areas identified in the current risk log, and the associated mitigating actions, is given in the table below:

Risk Area	Examples of Mitigating Actions
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. Specific measures include having a new Quality Assurance process, with a new Head of QA in post to ensure effective management oversight
Understanding and applying quality practice	Practice Improvement project to implement quality standards and assurance
Multi-agency capacity and capability	Partnership Engagement Project being delivered under Children First; Strategy in preparation with partner consultation in progress
Demonstrating to the Commissioner that WSCC has capability and capacity to improve	Investment Plan in place; Practice Improvement Plan agreed by Ofsted; Improvement Board/Programme Board active; new leadership team in place; Workforce issues being resolved; Children First Strategy in preparation

Leadership capacity and capability	New leadership team in place and fully engaged
Organisational morale	New leadership in place, with proactive staff engagement; events, weekly messages delivered; dedicated communications officer in place
Administrative support for social workers	Principle of freeing front-line staff agreed, and support plan in preparation
Data management supporting good practice	Using technology to improve service recognised as a priority; planning in hand to deliver project allied to quality improvement
Preparation for December Ofsted monitoring visit	Senior Improvement Lead planning and coordinating action streams; close liaison with Ofsted

6. Other Options Considered

6.1 Not applicable – this is a report for information.

7. Equality Duty

7.1 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.

7.2 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.

8. Social Value

8.1 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.

9. Crime and Disorder Implications

- 9.1 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.

10. Human Rights Implications

- 10.1 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.
- 10.2 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.

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