

West Sussex Health and Wellbeing Board



Children First Improvement – Review of Commissioner’s Report and Service Update

30 January 2020

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

Executive Summary

This paper explains the response to the Ofsted ‘Inadequate’ judgement of West Sussex Children’s Services in May 2019, and the subsequent appointment of a Commissioner to make recommendations as to whether the service should remain under the County Council’s control. The Commissioner’s report has now been published; it recommends that Children’s Services be transferred to a Children’s Trust for the time being. Notwithstanding the serious criticism contained in the report, the Commissioner has found evidence of recent service improvement, and this view has been endorsed by an Ofsted Monitoring Visit in December 2019. This paper goes on to summarise the improvements that have taken place, and explain the next steps in the improvement journey during 2020.

The Health and Wellbeing Board is asked to:

- 1) Note the Commissioner’s recommendations (Section 1), and the actions already undertaken as part of a continuing improvement narrative (sections 2 & 3);
- 2) Note the next steps in the improvement journey (Section 4);
- 3) Continue to support the County Council through the partnership in enacting the necessary changes.

1. Background

- 1.1 On 20 June 2019 the Health and Wellbeing Board received a report explaining the initial response to the ‘Inadequate’ Ofsted judgement of Children’s Services ([Ofsted report](#) May 2019), and the County Council’s creation of a Practice Improvement Plan to address the 10 key recommendations for service improvement that Ofsted had made. That June 2019 report went on to explain that the Department for Education (DfE) on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education, had appointed a Children’s Services Commissioner, John Coughlan, to judge the County Council’s capability and capacity to return the service to a satisfactory level. The Commissioner’s report was published on 17 December

2019, and this current report now summarises the Commissioner's findings and explains how his recommendations are being addressed. It also provides a broad summary of all the service improvements and developments that have been in progress during the second half of 2019 and looks towards further improvement planned in 2020.

The Commissioner's Report

- 1.2 The [Commissioner's report](#) was published on 17 December 2019. Its main conclusion was that the prospects for service improvement were not sufficiently strong, and accordingly the service should be transferred from the County Council to an Alternative Delivery Model (ADM). This section gives a necessarily summarised account of the content of the Commissioner's report, and focuses on its key recommendations.
- 1.3 In reaching his conclusions the Commissioner has undertaken detailed research and analysis, based on interviews with a comprehensive range of stakeholders. This investigation considered not only the delivery of Children's Services, but also the corporate context in which the service operated. Among the key corporate themes identified were:
 - dysfunctionality in relationships between members and officers;
 - an opaque and inefficient style of decision-making, coupled with excessive bureaucracy;
 - an unwillingness at senior level to entertain alternative viewpoints;
 - senior management 'churn' – i.e. frequent changes in service leadership personnel – leading to lack of strategic direction.
- 1.4 In terms of Children's Services, the following broad themes were identified:
 - weaknesses and non-compliance in important areas of governance;
 - ineffective scrutiny and challenge;
 - insufficient attention to safeguarding of children;
 - lack of understanding of quality and performance management;
 - lack of focus on children as individuals with needs and wishes;
 - complex and inefficient processes;
 - dysfunctionality in interactions between the leadership, service managers and staff, giving rise to an impoverished culture.
- 1.5 Despite these very serious findings, the Commissioner has acknowledged that recent service improvements provide some encouragement that a return to sound operational practice in Children's Services is feasible. These are summarised against his recommendations below. Notwithstanding these, the Commissioner has determined that, due to the problems he has identified within the broader corporate context, placing the service with an Alternative Delivery Model for the time being is essential to its recovery.
- 1.6 The new Leader of the Council has apologised on behalf of the Authority for the deficiencies in its services to children and young people, and for the underlying defects of leadership, governance and culture which the Commissioner has identified.

Implementing the Commissioner's Recommendations

- 1.7 The Commissioner made 10 specific recommendations: these and the progress to date in implementing them, are summarised below.
- 1. The Alternative Delivery Model (ADM):** This is the key recommendation, and under John Coughlan's guidance immediate steps will be taken to commence the setting up of a Children's Trust. Its formation will take some months to accomplish, and the appointment of an Improvement Partner (Recommendation 3) is intended to guarantee and support continuing service development in the interim.
 - 2. Appointment of a Commissioner:** John Coughlan has been reappointed by the Secretary of State for a further 12 months; he will provide strategic direction through his chairmanship of the reconstituted Children First Improvement Board, and continue to report to the DfE on the progress being achieved.
 - 3. Improvement Partner:** Hampshire County Council has been appointed our Partner in Practice in order to provide service development support in the period before an ADM can be formally created. Steve Crocker, the Hampshire Director of Children's Services and his team will work closely with WSCC Children's Services.
 - 4. Role and status of Director of Children's Services:** Within the County Council's Constitution, the legal role of Director of Children's Services (DCS) is now formally established as 'Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning' and reports directly to the Chief Executive. The Executive Director now has formal responsibility both for social care and education functions, as best practice dictates.
 - 5. Status of Improvement Board:** the Board has been reconstituted to reflect Ofsted priorities, Under the Commissioner's chairmanship, and is no longer 'voluntary'.
 - 6. Management Training Programme:** the Commissioner requires that management and staff have a common and robust understanding of quality and performance, in addressing 'what good looks like' throughout the service: arrangements are in hand to give this effect.
 - 7. Staff Engagement:** Arrangements are in hand to enact a process of continuous service-wide engagement, to ensure that all members of the service are culturally attuned to the expectations of the improvement journey, and professional decisions are informed by these expectations. One round of leadership team engagement occurred in November 2019, and a further round is planned for February 2020.
 - 8. Improving dialogue with partners & MPs:** The Commissioner stresses that building confidence in the Council's overall leadership within a broad partnership is essential to corporate health. This is fully acknowledged, and an initial response is the development, with partners, of the Children First Strategic Approach.
 - 9. Corporate Parenting Panel:** The Panel has been reconstituted, and will now be chaired by the Cabinet Member for Children & Young People. In common with the Children and Young People's Services Select Committee,

the expectation of exercising a more rigorous scrutiny function and engaging closely with frontline service delivery and the experiences of children and young people, is being put into effect.

10. **Corporate review of leadership, governance and culture:** The new Leader of the County Council has given strong personal and organisational commitment to conducting a full review of these, and this approach was endorsed at County Council on 17 December 2019. An early example of cultural change is the introduction of Cabinet meetings in public; the Commissioner's Report itself was debated at a Cabinet meeting in public on 14 January 2020.

Ofsted Monitoring Visit, December 2019

- 1.8 As part of the journey of improvement, Ofsted is undertaking short, focused monitoring visits on a 3-4 month basis, which will culminate in a full service re-inspection in 2021. The first Ofsted Monitoring Visit took place on 3-4 December 2019. The monitoring visit was helpful in assessing the progress being made and the challenges still faced in ensuring quality and consistency across the service. The inspectors gave feedback broadly as follows:
- The children's services workforce is now more stable and caseloads are becoming manageable;
 - Staff are highly committed to delivering good outcomes for children, and staff morale has improved;
 - Staff know their children well and have a clear sense of direction for their work;
 - Some progress has been made in the quality of social work practice, particularly around visits, direct work with children and the use of tools to capture children's views;
 - There is a need to ensure that the arrangements to oversee children who are privately fostered meet best practice standards, and are effectively joined up between teams;
 - There is more work to do to ensure the consistent application of thresholds, and the quality of assessments and plans;
 - The service understands itself well, and knows what more still needs to be done.

2. The Children First Improvement Programme

Leadership and Management in Children's Services

- 2.1 During the second half of 2019, a new management team was formed under the Executive Director for Children, Young People and Learning, and Director of Children's Services, John Readman, with the capability and experience to lead the service on the improvement journey. John Readman will be moving to another authority at the end of January 2020. He is taking part in the current process of appointing a successor.
- 2.2 The importance of a strong and supportive culture as part of the service improvement has been recognised. Regular sequences of staff engagement sessions are now in place, 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.

Workforce Development

- 2.3 Having a stable, fully-staffed social care workforce, possessing the necessary skills and resources is a key ingredient of an effective service. During 2019 significant steps have been taken to turn around high levels of vacancies, an uncompetitive recruitment offer, and unsustainably high caseloads for staff in post. Although staff had remained committed and hardworking, high vacancy levels had contributed significantly to the poor performance identified by Ofsted. The following narrative summarises the improvements made in this area.
- 2.4 **Social Worker Vacancy gap:** The service currently comprises approximately 511 FTE (full-time equivalent) social worker posts. The Vacancy Gap which in February 2019 stood at 18.5% is now (December 2019) at 2.2%. The vacancy gap has been closed in part through the engagement of additional agency workers (approximately 80 at December 2019): in the short-to-medium term, agency workers will be retained in response to specific demand; however it is intended to place greater reliance on a stable, permanent workforce in the longer term.
- 2.5 **Recruitment and Retention:** A retention package is in place for social workers who commit to stay with WSCC for at least 18 months. To date around 93% of those eligible have taken up this offer. West Sussex now has terms and conditions as competitive as any of its neighbours. A new recruitment programme has commenced under the headline 'Be My Voice'. The Council's social work academy has also been successful in training aspiring social workers through to newly-qualified status.
- 2.6 **Caseloads:** Under-staffing, combined with rising demand for social care had led to unsustainable levels of caseloads for individual staff members. This inevitably reduced the timeliness and quality of interventions and hampered continuing professional development. Maximum case-holding targets have been set, and 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. At the current time, caseloads are being progressively reduced in line with the thresholds set.
- 2.7 **Summary:** Broadly speaking, the current staffing situation is acceptable in the context of a journey of improvement, and remains under close management review. It is important to continue to monitor the key measures over a longer time sequence, in order to progressively increase the proportion of permanent staff and establish that full control over caseloads has been achieved. Measures to support staff through such provisions as training, management oversight and improving IT equipment are included in the digest of other service improvements that follows.

3. Other Service Improvements during 2019

- 3.1 Additionally to the governance improvements referred to at 1.7 and the workforce development initiatives in Section 2 above, a very wide range of

changes is being made in line with the objectives of the Practice Improvement Plan. Key examples are as follows:

- A programme has been put in place to address **wider transformation**, including service re-design, better use of technology and workforce development;
- **Signs of Safety** has been adopted as the practice framework, so that staff know what is expected of them;
- **An updated Scheme of Delegation** and **Supervision Policy** are in place to improve management oversight and accountability, so that staff are well-supported to deliver high-quality practice;
- **A new Learning and Development Pathway** is being developed, so that staff are provided with appropriate and relevant training;
- **A new Policy and Practice Group** is in place to ensure that Social Workers know 'what good looks like' and children and families receive a consistent and professional service;
- **Improvements to information systems** (Mosaic) and recording protocols used by social workers;
- **Improvements in social work practice** in Children Looked After and Assessment and Intervention teams; children being visited more often; assessments are more timely - all these being supported by improvement in management oversight.

4. Further service improvement planned for 2020

4.1 The following are examples of the main improvement measures now being planned for the coming year:

- **Working closely with Hampshire CC** as Partner in Practice in specific work streams, starting in January 2020;
- **Children with Disabilities**: an area of focus with support from Hampshire as Partner in Practice;
- **Neglect and Domestic Abuse**: a revised Neglect Strategy and toolkit will be completed in early 2020;
- Intensive support and coaching in **Family Support and Protection Teams**;
- Reviewing practice in **High Risk Complex Adolescents Team** and multi-agency arrangements for contextual safeguarding;
- Reviewing practice in commissioning of **external placements** for Children Looked After;
- Continuing to embed improvement work already underway in **Assessment and Intervention Teams, the MASH, and Early Help** to streamline processes and improve the timeliness of decision-making; more consistency in the application of thresholds and the quality of social work practice;
- Evaluating and further establishing **quality assurance audit process** to improve compliance across the service;
- **Adoption**: membership of Adoption South East from April 2020, to improve experiences and outcomes for children being considered for adoption;
- **Life Story Work**: training for foster carers and staff being launched;
- **Fostering**: secure base training to be introduced, so that carers can respond to children more skilfully;
- Creation of specific **Family and Friends Team** and tighter support to be offered to Special Guardians;

- Transfer of **Care Leavers Service** from Early Help to Children Looked After Service;
- Continue to address actions in **Practice Improvement Plan**, including Private Fostering, Permanence Planning, and Corporate Parenting Panel.

5. Summary: Support from the Board and the wider Partnership

5.1 This report has summarised a great body of very diverse improvement work in progress or planned within Children's Services. However, the County Council fully understands that its strategic aim of giving every child the best start in life depends equally on the support of the wider partnership – Health, Schools, District Councils, MPs and others – working on the broad Start of Life agenda. The Council is also mindful of the Commissioner's recommendation (No.8 at para 1.7 above) that attention should be paid to redefining external working relationships prior to the full introduction of an Alternative Delivery Model.

Children First Strategic Approach

5.2 It is in this context that, in collaboration with partners across West Sussex, the County Council is developing a West Sussex Children First Strategic Approach. The Health and Wellbeing Board has been closely involved in the initial consultation and preparation, and received a report on this subject at its last meeting on 10 October 2019. The Strategic Approach is now expected to be adopted in March 2020. The continued support and engagement of all partners is requested to give vitality to this initiative, so that children in West Sussex can in future be assured of services that truly promote the best start in life.

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