
Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services and the County Council's Children First Service Improvement Programme: Progress Report

Introduction

- 1** This update report is one of a regular sequence being made by the Cabinet Member to all members of the County Council. Its purpose is to keep members informed about developments arising from the Ofsted judgement of Children's Services (May 2019) and to set out the progress being made in enacting the necessary service improvements.

Continuing role of the Children's Services Commissioner

- 2** Members will recall that the report of the Commissioner, John Coughlan, who acts on behalf of the Department for Education, was published on 17 December 2019, and debated at County Council on that day. The topic was further discussed in public at the Cabinet meeting on 14 January 2020. John Coughlan has been reappointed as Children's Services Commissioner for a further 12 months; in this capacity he is chairing the Children First Improvement Board. Concurrently, Hampshire County Council (whose children's services are rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted) will continue to support the improvement journey as West Sussex's 'Partner in Practice' during 2020.

Children's Trust

- 3** The Commissioner's report recommended that a Children's Trust be set up in order to ensure that the necessary improvements to Children's Services can be achieved in an appropriate organisational environment. Arrangements are being made to give effect to this measure, which will take some months to be realised in full. Further details will be reported to members in due course. All the other specific recommendations of the Commissioner have been enacted or are in progress of delivery.

Ofsted Monitoring Visit

- 4** As part of the journey of improvement, Ofsted is undertaking short, focused monitoring visits on a quarterly basis, which will culminate in a full service re-inspection in 2021. The first Ofsted Monitoring visit took place on 3 to 4 December 2019, and the inspectors found 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;
 - 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; and
 - The service understands itself well and knows what more still needs to be done.

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- 5 This outcome is a positive one for the County Council, and we are determined that this trajectory of improvement will continue. It also provides a strong justification for the extra investment which the County Council has programmed towards Children's Services. The next scheduled Monitoring Visit is in the second week of May, when inspectors will be focusing on an examination of services to Children Looked After.

Children's Services Leadership

- 6 John Readman left the County Council at the end of January to become Director of Children's Services at Cumbria County Council. John's leadership of the service through an intensely challenging period has been exemplary, and we wish to record our thanks to him. Under his guidance, the green shoots of recovery have been seen. The new Director of Children's Services and Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning is Lucy Butler, the current Director of Children's Services at Oxfordshire County Council; she will join West Sussex in early May. Until then, the Interim Director from within the service is Ann Marie Dodds.

The Children First Practice Improvement Plan

- 7 The detailed service development work now being undertaken is set out in the agreed Practice Improvement Plan, adopted in August 2019 and closely aligned to the 12 main recommendations made by Ofsted in its inspection report of May 2019. These areas of endeavour remain entirely valid, but some detailed adjustment and refocussing is required, and a refreshed Improvement Plan will undergo a process of scrutiny and re-adoption during March.

Strengthening the Workforce

- 8 Significant activity is continuing to build a resilient workforce, fully motivated and resourced to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people and their families. I am pleased to be able to report sustained progress in the following areas:
- The uncovered vacancy gap is currently 5.34%, having been 18.5% in February 2019;
 - This outcome is supported by a Recruitment and Retention offer, which has currently been taken up by around 93% of eligible staff;
 - Around 75 FTE Agency Social Workers are in post to cover establishment vacancies and support the reduction of caseloads; reliance on this contingent will reduce as staffing and workloads are stabilized in the longer term;
 - The above measures are having a positive impact on reducing high caseloads: so far, four out of the eight social work teams have achieved or improved upon their agreed maximum caseload targets: we are intent upon sustaining this improvement, while ensuring that social workers have the necessary technical, administrative and pastoral support; and
 - The incidence of qualified staff leaving the service has reduced, while sickness and other long-term absence is stable.

Other recent service improvements

- 9 A very wide range of changes is being made in line with the objectives of the Practice Improvement Plan. Key examples are as follows:
- **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;
 - A programme 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** 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** to ensure that Social Workers know 'what good looks like' and children and families receive a consistent and professional service; and
 - **Improvements to information systems** (Mosaic) and recording protocols used by social workers; roll-out of new IT equipment prioritising key staff;

Further service improvement planned for 2020

- 10 The following are examples of the main improvement measures now being planned for the coming year:
- **Working closely with Hampshire County Council** as Partner in Practice in specific work streams;
 - **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 is being completed;
 - 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;

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

Summary

11 This report summarises 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. We are grateful for their continued engagement; above all we are grateful to frontline staff, who daily confront challenging situations on behalf of children and young people and their families. We are determined to continue to help them to ensure that the signs of improvement now evident are sustained and taken forward into the next level, so that our service can be objectively recognised as the involvement of members through scrutiny functions and corporate parenting responsibilities are essential contributions to the outcomes that everyone in the County Council desires for children in young people in West Sussex.

For information

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