

## **Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee**

**4 March 2020**

### **Children First Improvement – Service Update**

#### **Report by 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 09 January 2020. It notes the new service leadership arrangements, provides the latest monitoring information on workforce development, and introduces the special topic for scrutiny at this meeting, that of Quality Assurance.

#### **The focus for scrutiny**

The Scrutiny Committee is requested to:

1. note and discuss the Children's Services Development and Workforce narratives (Sections 1-3);
2. receive and comment on the current briefing on Quality Assurance (Section 4 & presentation to be delivered).

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

## **1. Update on Service Developments**

### **Leadership and Management in Children's Services**

- 1.1 At the end of January 2020, the Executive Director for Children, Young People and Learning, and Director of Children's Services, John Readman left West Sussex to take up a new post as Director of Children's Services at Cumbria County Council. At County Council on 14 February, the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People paid tribute to Mr Readman for his leadership during the previous year, and for piloting the service towards greater stability.
- 1.2 The new Executive Director for Children, Young People and Learning is to be Lucy Butler, the current Director of Children's Services at Oxfordshire County Council, who commences her role on 14 April 2020. Oxfordshire has secured and subsequently retained a 'Good' Ofsted rating under her leadership.
- 1.3 The Interim Executive Director is AnnMarie Dodds, (previously Assistant Director, Early Help) who will provide assurance and continuity in the intervening period, thus ensuring that the momentum of the improvement

process is maintained. A further round of staff engagement at venues around the county has recently taken place under her leadership.

## 2. Children’s Services Workforce Update

This section considers trends between February 2019 and the latest Workforce information, dated 3 February 2020.

### Vacancy Gap

2.1 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 agency worker cover. The following trends arise, measured from a baseline at February 2019:

▪ 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%
▪ December 2019	2.2%
▪ <b>February 2020</b>	<b>5.3%</b>

2.2 The current vacancy gap has worsened and is now predicted to remain at around 5%. The number of absent employees has increased since last month and is currently 29.4 FTE; 18.5 are due to career breaks or maternity leave. There are currently no staff suspended, but the 10.9 FTE on long-term sick-leave is an increase of 6.6FTE on the previous month. The underlying reasons for this increase are currently being examined, but it must be acknowledged that the environment for recruiting social workers remains a very challenging one across the country.

### Starters and Leavers

2.3 The number of leavers over the next 3 months shows a spike in February 2020 of 5 FTE, which is higher than has been experienced in the past 6 months. The table below shows the current full-time equivalent numbers of expected starters and leavers between February and April 2020. Although expected starters exceed leavers in the short-term, there have been a significant number of enquiries from those in receipt of the recruitment and retention payment wanting to find out about how they can repay this. It is likely that these will translate into resignations over the next few weeks. The pipeline of new applications is also decreasing. It is important that this situation is closely monitored and responded to, as it appears to indicate volatility. A number of short, medium and longer-term strategies are being explored to mitigate against the risk of an increasing vacancy gap.

Month	Pipeline Starters	Pipeline Leavers
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February 2020	1.6	5.0
March 2020	3.6	2.8
April 2020	6.0	0.6
<b>Net gain for period</b>	<b>2.8</b>	

- 2.4 Discussions are held with staff giving notice, to understand their reasons for leaving. Of the 16 exit interviews held in the past 6 months, 7 expressed dissatisfaction with the job, 3 with location and travel, 2 for personal/family reasons and 1 related to salary. The service continues to listen carefully to staff about their experiences at work and what can be done to improve these, with exit data being carefully monitored.

### **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; the longer-term trend is intended to be downwards, but this depends on successful recruitment of permanent staff. The agency social worker contingent covering unfilled vacancies or undertaking additional work to help reduce caseloads, currently equates to just under 14% 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	78.7 FTE
▪ December 2019	80.7 FTE
▪ January 2020	76.2 FTE
▪ <b>February 2020</b>	<b>70.8 FTE</b>

- 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 give a permanent vacancy gap of 13.4% (68.7 FTE). The long-term intention remains 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 Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYEs, 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	85.0%
▪ August 2019	88.5%
▪ September 2019	90.9%
▪ October 2019	90.9%
▪ November 2019	91.0%
▪ December 2019	93.0%
▪ January	92.0%
▪ February 2020	92.0%

### **Caseloads**

- 2.8 The Committee has previously 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. Newly qualified social workers (ASYE) have a protected caseload which steadily increases in their first year of qualified practice. For these workers, caseloads commence at 10 and increase to 16/17 dependant on which part of the service they practice.
- 2.9 At present, there are only 2 service areas that have an average of over 18 children on their caseload: Assessment and Intervention South (19.1) and Family Support & Protection North (21.1). It is acknowledged that whilst other service areas have an *average* of less than 18, there are individual workers within those teams whose caseload is above the target level.
- 2.10 It remains a priority to ensure caseloads are manageable across the service, whilst also ensuring that children receive the most appropriate service, in the right place and at the right time. Additionally, work continues within the service to identify ways to streamline processes and develop smarter, more efficient ways of working, which will support staff without compromising the quality of practice and the service delivered.

### **Workforce Summary**

- 2.11 To summarise, sustaining the positive effects previously reported will be challenging, especially in the face of increasing uncertainty for the workforce in the context of a national scarcity of experienced social workers. Key to maintaining a low vacancy gap will be the retention of the existing workforce, although some volatility is to be expected and this remains an area of risk. At the Ofsted Monitoring Visit in December 2019, the inspectors recognised the positive trends in Workforce data, and commented that staff morale had improved compared with the situation they had found during the original inspection in February 2019. Management remains fully committed to listening and responding to the views of staff, giving effective managerial and case-working support, helping to address the causes of under-performance, and providing the right training, administrative and IT facilities. This journey of improvement needs to continue over the coming months for the benefits to become fully realised.

## **3. Other Key Service Initiatives**

### **Updating the Practice Improvement Plan**

- 3.1 The Committee will recall that the Children First Practice Improvement Plan was created following the Ofsted judgement in May 2019, representing the service response to the 12 key recommendations made by Ofsted at that time. The Plan remains the key mechanism for identifying and managing all the different objectives of the Children First Improvement agenda. Given the progress made during 2019/20, it is now necessary to revise the detail of the plan, reshaping its contents to accommodate elements that have now been accomplished, and gaining a fresh focus on improvement approaches that are now much better understood. This review will take into account the variety of feedback received from the Commissioner's report, from the first Ofsted Monitoring Visit, and the learning from the many investigatory and diagnostic activities undertaken during the past 12 months.

### **Ofsted Monitoring Visit**

- 3.2 The next Ofsted Monitoring Visit is scheduled for 11-13 May 2020. It is hoped that the Quality Assurance work described in Section 4 below will contribute to the identification of further service improvement by the inspectors at that time.

## **4. Issues for consideration by the Scrutiny Committee**

### **Detailed examination of key service areas**

- 4.1 The Committee has agreed to receive a regular sequence of specific updates covering social work areas that were subject to specific Ofsted recommendations. This process will allow members to gain in-depth knowledge of different aspects of the service; to provide challenge and questioning in relation to the programmes in hand; and to assure themselves that the Improvement Plan delivery is gathering momentum, with a clear trajectory for positive change. These updates will be supported by explanations from staff and stakeholders as relevant, and members are encouraged to test and challenge the material presented. The topic for this meeting is Quality Assurance.

### **Quality Assurance in Children's Services**

- 4.2 Quality is the foundation for all good practice in social care, and fundamental to every function of Children's Services, which together seek to deliver the best outcomes for children. Quality therefore plays a key role in the improvement journey of the Children First Programme. In its May 2019 report, Ofsted found many service areas in which quality was lacking, notably social work practice, planning, timely intervention, and hearing the voice of the child. The Practice Improvement Plan (para 3.1 above) comprehensively addresses these and similar issues. The topic being presented to this meeting of the Committee deals with the important issue of Quality Assurance across the service.
- 4.3 In its report, Ofsted also found weaknesses in "The effectiveness of quality assurance arrangements." Quality Assurance addresses challenges to the service of the following nature:

- How can the service build the quality of its practice, to achieve good outcomes for children, while generating a common understanding of what good practice is, based on sound evidence?
- How can the service ensure that the views, strengths and rights of children, families and their networks are sensitively and accurately recorded, and that this understanding is routinely incorporated into the planning and delivery of service interventions, to ensure the best outcomes?
- How can the service ensure that its practice complies with statutory and local policy and procedure?
- How can managers ensure that frontline staff are applying the correct practice and procedures, and support them through dialogue to improve their knowledge and skills?
- In sum, how can the service be collectively confident that it is doing the right things, to the correct standard, consistently across all its various teams?

### **Quality Assurance Framework**

- 4.4 In order to address these and similar topics, a new Quality Assurance Framework is being finalised. This will support the delivery of the Practice Improvement Plan and share with it the function of setting out 'what good looks like', which is the fundamental driver for service improvement. The meeting will receive a presentation on the Framework and its role in ensuring that practice within the service is based on a robust understanding of the required performance standards, with methods for verifying that they are being achieved.

### **The Audit Process**

- 4.5 Underpinning the quest for Quality is a system of detailed internal scrutiny of individual casework. At the Ofsted Monitoring Visit in December 2019, one of the positive findings was that inspectors could recognise that the service possesses an accurate view of its distance travelled on the improvement journey, and what further needs to be done; this has been achieved in part through a rigorous approach to Case Audit. The presentation will explain and illustrate the principles and methodology involved, including the ways in which individual conclusions and judgements are tested and challenged, in order to achieve a more objective view of service quality. Alongside, the role of the Performance Board and other internal governance in ensuring a top-to-bottom understanding of quality throughout the service will be explained.

### **Practice Week**

- 4.6 Practice Week is a recognised approach to ensuring that management remains in close touch with the realities and challenges of practical casework and the lived experiences of children and families. Involving service leaders in observing and reviewing detailed casework complements the audit activity and strengthens learning and decision-making functions throughout the service. The presentation will explain and illustrate the operation of this

event and how it benefits the service. A Practice Week is scheduled for the week commencing 30 March 2020.

## Summary

- 4.7 Members will appreciate that Quality Assurance lies at the heart of the Improvement agenda in Children’s Services. It also correlates closely with this Committee’s scrutiny function. This item is intended to build a foundation for enhancing future scrutiny by the Committee. Accordingly, members are encouraged to examine and provide challenge to the material presented.

## 5. Consultation

- 5.1 Not applicable – this is a report for information.

## 6. Risk Implications and Mitigations

- 6.1 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 in progress to implement quality standards and assurance
Multi-agency capacity and capability	Partnership Engagement Project being delivered under Children First; Strategic Approach in preparation with partner involvement
Demonstrating to the Commissioner and DfE that the service can continue its improvement journey	Investment Plan in place; Practice Improvement Plan agreed by Ofsted; Improvement Board/Programme Board active; new leadership team fully functional; Workforce issues

	being resolved; Children First Strategic Approach in preparation; County Council responding transparently to Commissioner's report; support from Hampshire as Partner in Practice
Leadership capacity and capability	New leadership team in place and fully engaged
Organisational morale & retention of experienced social work staff, in the context of national market scarcity	Retention scheme successfully implemented with a range of benefits equal to that available elsewhere; new leadership in place, with proactive staff engagement; events, weekly messages delivered through dedicated communications officer; a programme of training, development and support in place; caseloads now being managed down to sustainable levels; Ofsted inspectors commented on improved morale during their December 2019 visit
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
Preparedness for cycle of Ofsted monitoring visits	Senior Improvement Lead planning and coordinating action streams; close liaison with Ofsted; December 2019 visit and outcomes satisfactory

## **7. Other Options Considered**

7.1 Not applicable – this is a report for information.

## **8. Equality Duty**

8.1 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.

- 8.2 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.

## **9. Social Value**

- 9.1 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.

## **10. Crime and Disorder Implications**

- 10.1 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.

## **11. Human Rights Implications**

- 11.1 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.
- 11.2 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.

### **AnnMarie Dodds**

Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning

**Contact:** Garath Symonds, Senior Improvement Lead – 03302 222511

**Appendix A:** Presentation on Quality Assurance – to follow.

**Background Papers:** None.