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## **West Sussex County Council's Children First Service Improvement Programme: Progress Report – November 2020**

### **Introduction**

- 1** I am writing with a further update to all members to coincide with the County Council meeting on 6 November. In my previous report I outlined the plans for Service Redesign that will lead to a really strong, skilled and valued workforce, using the latest techniques to benefit children, young people and their families throughout West Sussex. This vital and exciting work continues, and we expect to be able to publish detailed proposals in the spring. This time I would like to discuss the resumption of Ofsted inspections of Children's Services, and the Children's Trust.

### **Ofsted Focused Visit, October 2020**

- 2** Members will recall that following the Ofsted judgement in 2019, Children's Services were subject to a regime of regular monitoring visits from Ofsted. After the visit in December 2019 this process had to be suspended due to the national COVID-19 crisis. However, Ofsted recommenced its inspection programme in September 2020 and notified West Sussex of its intention to conduct a Focused Visit between 12 and 22 October 2020.
- 3** I have said before that the key to improvement is self-awareness, and I believe that the new management of Children's Services has developed a really good grasp of where the service is in its journey – the strengths to build on, and what further needs to change to reach a good standard. The chance to welcome Ofsted inspectors back, therefore, is a golden opportunity to receive objective and candid feedback to support and hopefully validate our own impressions. This in turn creates a baseline that we can all subscribe to, and which can then be the springboard for the further changes we will be making in 2021.
- 4** A Focused Visit enables Ofsted to make a short but thorough examination and has a broader scope than an Ofsted Monitoring Visit, with a particular focus on the quality of decision-making for children. This time Ofsted wished to test in particular: the service's response to COVID-19; the quality of leadership and transformation; the current quality of services to Children Looked After (CLA); and our progress on addressing the Health and Protection of children.
- 5** The formal Ofsted findings are due to be published on 4 December 2020; I will be able to update members on the informal feedback provided at the end of the Visit at the full Council meeting later that month.

### **The Children's Trust**

- 6** Members will be aware that on 20 October 2020, the Cabinet agreed to approve the principal provisions for the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Department for Education. It thereby made a formal commitment to establish a Children's Trust, and further agreed the conditions under which it will operate. The Trust will become operational from October 2021, running for an initial indicative period of five years. It has to be said that establishing the Trust is not something the County Council had a choice about, since it has been a legal requirement ever since the Secretary of State's Directive to us in November last year, following publication of the Commissioner's Report. The Council has however exercised its

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discretion in terms of the detailed form and scope of the Trust, the outline of which has now been agreed, and is set out in the MoU.

- 7** My view is that the Children's Trust is good news for vulnerable children and young people in West Sussex, and their families: that must always be our primary consideration. The Trust will be an independent body, working single-mindedly for service improvement, but able to do business effectively with the County Council. It should be noted that the Council retains its full statutory responsibilities for Children's Social Care under these arrangements. My role as Lead Member for Children and Young People, and the Scrutiny function of holding the Trust to account for its performance will be as important as they are now.
- 8** We have deliberately chosen to include the full range of services to children in the scope of the Trust: we have already seen evidence that unifying Social Care, Early Help and Education functions under a single management structure (something the Inspector's report required us to put into effect) has greatly improved the connectivity and outcomes of these services, as illustrated by the comprehensive response to COVID-19. I believe that our partners on whom the delivery of services also depends in so many ways will be able to work effectively with the Trust. Further detail about the Trust, its status, governance and relationship with the Council can be found in the [Cabinet Report](#).

### **The Staff Perspective**

- 9** All staff associated with the affected services will transfer to the Children's Trust, retaining their existing terms and conditions, including pension rights. It is essential that they are fully supported through a period that may create a sense of uncertainty. We are clear that the planned service transformation would take place whether or not the Trust came into being. However, the Trust will ensure that staff can concentrate on improving prospects for vulnerable children using the best techniques and support available. Indeed, we hope that the Trust will become a home where high-quality professionals will seek to build their careers, and that our competitive employment package and supportive conditions will encourage the best people to work with us.
- 10** Lucy Butler, the Executive Director, and her senior staff are determined to ensure all staff remain informed and engaged in the improvement journey and service re-design. To that effect the senior leadership team undertook a substantial staff engagement exercise (between July and September 2020), comprising 15 face-to-face events and two virtual sessions, welcoming over 450 staff from across the breadth of Children, Young People and Learning. The new, more specific proposals for the Service Redesign are being presented at further staff workshops during the autumn. It is expected that the detailed options will come forward for formal consideration by Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet in spring 2021.
- 11** Additionally to the above, I was present recently at two Round Table meetings with staff, on 5 and 9 October. These were an opportunity to meet informally with representatives from different parts of the service, to gain an understanding of their perspectives, and to answer their questions. I was struck by the professionalism on display, a recognition of the task still facing us, and the determination to reach standards of which we can all be proud.

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## **Other Service Improvement Initiatives**

**12** The following is a summary of current and forthcoming developments within the service improvement agenda:

### **Service Redesign**

- Work is progressing on the 'Whole Service' design, based on the Family Safeguarding model of practice, and embodying best practice standards;
- An Assessment and Development programme for managers has now been created and is out to tender: this will further enhance professional standards;
- The new employment Offer for Social Workers is being finalised; the existing retention scheme will remain in place until the new scheme becomes operational in July 2021; the service will therefore retain market competitiveness;
- The financial aspects of the service improvement and re-design will be incorporated into the budget proposals for 2021/22 in due course.

### **Staffing**

- The vacancy gap is being maintained at a low level - currently being 1.9% (which equates to 9.8 FTE posts);
- The frequency of management supervision of cases has further improved to 88% (a 25% increase in the four-month period April to July 2020), and representing a significant improvement in practice;
- As part of the continuing COVID-19 Recovery phase, face-to-face visits with children and young people continue to increase; more staff have returned to office-based working where this is deemed 'business critical'.

### **Other Operational Highlights**

- 97% of plans for CLA are now in place and being reviewed in the CLA teams;
- The new Children Looked After and Care Leavers Strategy 2020-24 is being finalised and will be agreed by the Cabinet Member in due course;
- A new and updated Leaving Care Local Offer has been developed jointly with young people, and recently launched;
- The previously closed children's residential homes (Cissbury Lodge and May House in Worthing, and Seaside at Shoreham) remain on course to reopen in the spring of 2021; I visited the site at Cissbury Lodge on 12 October and was very impressed with the facilities that are being created there;
- Improvements to the in-house Fostering Service are being prepared for decision.

## **Conclusion**

**13** I am convinced that our journey of improvement is gathering further momentum and look forward to receiving from Ofsted objective evidence of the progress being made, which I will share with members when available. It is clear that, although there is still lots to do, we are firmly on the right track to delivering good services again.

## **Youth Cabinet**

**14** I am delighted to end this update by introducing once again a message from Daisy, the Chair of our Youth Cabinet.

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With my best wishes for your continued good health.

**For information**

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## **Statement from the Chair of West Sussex Youth Cabinet**

**November 2020**

During October, tackling racial inequality in West Sussex has been at the centre of the Youth Cabinet's focus. Our webinars took place on 20, 21 and 22 October, covering three extremely relevant topics; black history, religion and culture, and racial inequalities. The campaign group organising these webinars have shown real compassion and organisation when planning this, and it's going to make a real difference to all of the communities in West Sussex.

Similarly, our annual council debate is coming in November; this year, we have decided to discuss how to improve and influence the pastoral curriculum on racial inequality in schools and colleges within West Sussex. It's a highlight of the Youth Cabinet's year, and we have already had a lot of Councillors, Cabinet Members and MPs accept invitations to join us.

The primary purpose of our Tackling Racial Inequality campaign is to help people of all ages in West Sussex, and hopefully, nationally, feel safe and welcomed in their communities. These two events are going to have a significant impact on many people, and as a Youth Cabinet, we are all incredibly proud of the progress we've made. Our other campaigns are still running on social media and will continue to. It's been a busy month!