

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

**7 January 2021**

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

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

#### **Summary**

To assist the Committee in its role of scrutinising the Children First Improvement Programme. This report updates the Committee on service developments since its last meeting on 5 November 2020 and includes topics on which it has requested further information. The report sets out the following:

- a) The published outcomes of the Focused Visit by Ofsted in October 2020 (Section 2).
- b) An update on the situation regarding the Children's Trust (Section 3).
- c) The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on service demand and the service performance response (Section 4).
- d) An update on Staff Engagement in the context of the current Service Redesign process (Section 5).
- e) A digest of other service improvement projects (Section 6).

#### **The focus for Scrutiny**

The Scrutiny Committee is asked to assess the progress made on the Children First Improvement Programme, as set out in this report.

Key areas for scrutiny include:

- a) Whether the current transformation activity provides assurance that the objectives for improved outcomes for children and young people will be met.
- b) To consider the published Ofsted assessment following the October 2020 Focused Visit and next steps, together with the recent amended Statutory Direction and the letter from the Children's Minister, and how these provide assurance of a satisfactory rate and quality of service improvement.
- c) To consider the impact of Covid-19 on service demand and how the service has responded in order to continue to meet the needs of children and young people.

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

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 This report is part of a series that provides the Committee with a regular update on plans and actions from the Children First Transformation

programme. The programme of improvement has reached its milestones for this year in that; Firstly, objective external evidence has now been received from Ofsted, the Department for Education and the Commissioner for Children's Services, confirming that the service is making progress and is on a trajectory of improvement; Secondly, having broadly stabilised the service a new phase of Service Redesign is commencing. This will build, during 2021, the new service that is intended to deliver on the expectation of 'what good looks like'. This report considers these subjects in turn, and goes on to provide further updates in line with the Committee's previous requests for additional information.

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

- 2.1 As reported to the previous meeting of the Committee, Ofsted conducted a Focused Visit between 12-22 October 2020. Inspectors formed a view of the whole service, but in particular they examined the quality and impact of key decision-making across help and protection, children in care and services for care leavers, together with the impact of leadership on service development, including the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 2.2 It should be noted that an Ofsted Focused Visit does not result in a formal Ofsted scale judgement, but a letter giving a narrative account of findings. This [letter](#) was published on the Ofsted website on 4 December 2020. The findings are summarised below. Service management agrees that the findings are a fair reflection of the current position. Although there is, quite rightly, continuing challenge from Ofsted, the inspectors did not present any findings that have come as a surprise to the service: the letter therefore confirms the management view of the service, as presented to Ofsted in the form of a self-assessment prior to the visit. Most importantly, no issues were raised by Ofsted for 'priority action' by the Council. This means in effect that Ofsted believes that, while further improvement is required, the service has broadly been stabilised and is well placed for the next phase of development.
- 2.3 The following is a summary of the Ofsted findings on this occasion:
  - Social workers report a shift in culture and express tentative optimism; there is a sense of ownership and direction. They felt well-supported during the pandemic.
  - Ofsted acknowledged that the service response during the pandemic has been effective and this ensured that children were kept safe.
  - The pace of change and improvement needs to increase; at times, the impact on children has not been sufficient.
  - Ofsted saw an improving picture with regards to practice in some areas; however, there are still too many areas of variable practice in:
    - Children with disabilities
    - Management & decision-making
    - Quality of assessments & care planning
    - Quality of records
    - Permanence and pre-proceedings
    - Exploitation & Missing

- Ofsted could see some progress against the recommendations from the last inspection.
- There was strength from the corporate approach and multi-agency partnerships during the pandemic, but there is still more to do around key areas of practice.
- Strengths were highlighted in regard to:
  - school attendance during the pandemic
  - the virtual school
  - the unaccompanied asylum seekers service
  - strong relationships with young people in the leaving care service

### **Management Response and next steps**

2.4 The outcome of the Focused Visit is broadly satisfactory, especially in regard to the alignment of the Ofsted view with that of the senior leadership team. The areas of 'variable practice' identified above are receiving very close attention and each has a dedicated improvement plan. Actions being prioritised with immediate effect include:

- Improvement managers are working in key Ofsted priority areas for maximum impact.
- Priority is being given to support managers and social workers to embed improved quality of practice so that there is accountability and oversight.
- Active support is being provided in the Children with Disabilities (CWD) service to respond on the improvements needed. This has included ensuring that all the outstanding assessments for CWD were completed by mid-December 2020.
- Carrying out a refresh of the Practice Improvement Plan and improvement approach in liaison with Hampshire County Council, the Partner in Practice.
- Ensuring all practice areas have action plans so that progress can be monitored in a rigorous and timely manner.

2.5 The future programme of Ofsted scrutiny is now expected to revert to Monitoring Visits on a roughly quarterly basis, with the next visit sometime in early 2021. It is hoped that a regular cycle of visits will provide continuity of Ofsted scrutiny and a clear understanding of the pace of improvement during a very intensive period of service development in 2021. This regular feedback will also assist the Scrutiny function of this Committee.

## **3. The Children's Trust**

### **New Statutory Direction**

3.1 As members are aware, on 10 December 2020 the Department for Education (DfE) on behalf of the Secretary of State issued a new Statutory Direction stating Children's Services should remain with the Council for at least a further year, with the move to a Children's Trust 'paused'. The new Direction was published alongside a second report by the Commissioner (October

2020) which states that there are 'compelling reasons why a company to deliver children's services functions on behalf of the Council is no longer required'.

### **The Minister's Letter**

- 3.2 At the same time, Children's Minister Vicky Ford wrote to the Leader of the County Council outlining details of the decision. The Minister said: 'I am encouraged that there is now a new political leadership in respect of children's services, supported by strong senior executive appointments, including a new director of children's services. This has undoubtedly been strengthened by the wider work the Council is undertaking to reform the corporate Council, with the support of its corporate improvement partner, East Sussex County Council. The strength of this partnership will evidently be important in creating the conditions in which children's services can continue to improve.' The Minister's letter goes on to refer in positive terms to the Ofsted findings during the Focused Visit as evidence of 'a shift in culture and that the building blocks for improvement are being put in place' and to the effective handling of service delivery throughout the pandemic.

The Statutory Direction, Minister's Letter and Report from the Commissioner can be found [here](#).

- 3.3 The new Direction requires the County Council to continue to work under the oversight of the Children's Services Commissioner, John Coughlan who has been confirmed in this role for the next year. Hampshire County Council will continue as the Partner in Practice, supporting further service improvement.

### **Commentary on the current situation**

- 3.4 These developments demonstrate categorically that the Department for Education, which acts as the legal arbiter on behalf of the Secretary of State for determining the governance of children's services, has decided that the County Council has made sufficient progress to justify suspending the enactment of a Children's Trust. The Council has achieved this result in two key areas: first, it has made the necessary constitutional changes and adopted appropriate corporate practice to give assurance of sound and compliant governance; and second, based on the opinions of Ofsted and the Commissioner, it has made enough progress against a trajectory of improvement, together with its declared forward intentions to transform its Children's Services, to justify retaining direct control of them.
- 3.5 These events mark a change from normal DfE practice of imposing an ADM on inadequate authorities, although it should be noted that this new situation formally marks only a suspension of the Trust process. Despite the positive indications, the Minister states: 'it is clear that there is still much work to do to address the weaknesses identified in 2019, and bring the standard of service up to the quality that children and families in West Sussex deserve.' This means that the imperative to make continuous positive change, as set out within the Children First programme is as strong as ever. The Minister's letter concludes: 'There therefore needs to be, over the next twelve months, real determination, effort and energy put into achieving the Council's

improvement plan and demonstrating a tangible and lasting impact on social work practice and outcomes.'

- 3.6 The suspension of the Trust process is welcomed from a corporate perspective. In operational terms, it means that senior management and other resources will not now be diverted from the primary task of improving the service over the next twelve months.

#### **4. Service Demand and Response during the Pandemic**

- 4.1 At the last meeting, the Committee received details of the robust operational approach taken to working with children and families during the pandemic. Ofsted confirmed in its recent visit (Section 2 above) that the Covid-19 response had been effective. Children remained safe, the workforce stayed healthy and effective and was well supported; all risks were effectively managed. Additionally the Committee examined the circumstances around the return to school following lockdown, which also painted a broadly satisfactory picture.

- 4.2 The Committee requested further information on the number of referrals, children under child protection plans and coming into care since the start of the pandemic and the impact this demand is having on the service. There was an inevitable reduction in demand during lockdown, although this has started to increase in recent months. **Appendix 1** sets out demand trends in graphic form, up to the end of November 2020, as reported to the Children First Improvement Board on 10 December. The main highlights are as follows:

- MASH experienced a lull during lockdown, but contacts rose by 20% in September 2020 and a further 5% in October, and referrals increased in line with this, returning to pre-Covid levels, although with a small reduction in November.
- Child Protection Plan numbers went up during lockdown, then stabilised between September and November, suggesting that safeguarding during lockdown had been effective; however numbers were up by about 14% over the course of the year.
- The number of children looked after has been subject to a long-term rise, independently of Covid-19, in line with national trends and also partly influenced by the 2019 Ofsted judgement; the trajectory slightly intensified in the Summer as lockdown ended.
- There has been a corresponding increase in volumes of open Child & Family Assessments: December 2020 - 1,675 open Assessments, compared to December 2019 - 1,141, although good rates of assessment completion have been maintained.

- 4.3 In terms of demand, the impact of Covid-19 has not been as significant as originally feared: this is due both to low staff absence and robust procedures having been put in place at an early stage, combined with cooperative partnership arrangements with schools and other stakeholders. Performance in general has been maintained - for instance, with the Timeliness of

Contacts and Referrals, 95.8% of contacts have been completed in 3 days and 93.5% of referrals completed in 3 days. Re-referrals have continued to reduce (to 23.7% in November having been 30.5% in June), indicating greater process efficiency and quality of assessment.

- 4.4 The Committee will note that staff have performed consistently well during this very difficult period; and as they have commented to Ofsted inspectors, they have been well supported to do so. In terms of caseloads, neither the Commissioner nor Ofsted have regarded these as excessive. Management has given constant and very close consideration to analysing and responding to issues of staff capacity and demand in different parts of the service and additional resources have been brought in where necessary. At team level supervision has improved, fostering professional confidence and a growth in quality and timeliness.

## **5. Staff Engagement in Service Redesign**

- 5.1 In line with the agreed service vision and operational principles, the Departmental Leadership Team has adopted an open and transparent managerial style, with collaborative communication keeping staff informed and engaged within a rapidly changing environment: this benefits morale, with staff more able to take part in a dialogue and move towards a shared understanding of the improvement challenge; they are thereby enabled to contribute fully to the service redesign work.
- 5.2 The Update reports to the meetings of this Committee on 24 September and 5 November introduced members to the main elements of the Service Transformation programme. As previously indicated, the service is now in an intensive period of redesign activity. During December 2020 and January 2021, a series of transformation workshops is being run with staff representatives, covering the following service areas:
- Fostering Service
  - Children with Disabilities
  - Children Looked After & Leaving Care
  - Safeguarding & Quality Assurance
  - Family Safeguarding
  - Youth Justice & Exploitation
  - Commissioning
- 5.3 The purpose of these workshops is to engage with staff to move from the current service model, towards the new Family Safeguarding model: this represents a crucial phase of the service redesign. It is acknowledged that staff have the knowledge and experience to contribute to the design process, and it is essential that – in common with all stakeholders – they participate actively in the discussions. The programme of activity remains on track for the new service to go live in the Autumn of 2021. Other associated elements of the service redesign are discussed in the following section.

## **6. Service Improvement Update**

The following is a summary of recent and forthcoming developments within the service improvement agenda:

## **Management Assessment & Development Programme**

- 6.1 Good quality management at all levels is a prerequisite of any effective service. A management assessment and development programme has been formulated to deliver the support and improvements necessary within the service. The assessment element of the programme will start in January 2021 with all managers attending the programme by the end of April 2021. Managers will then have access to a bespoke management training and development programme throughout the Spring and Summer. Its main features are:
- It invests in the staff through an inspirational, high impact development programme.
  - It aligns with the findings of the Ofsted inspection and Commissioner's report, thereby contributing to the necessary process of delayering and simplifying managerial levels.
  - It will support the cultural and practice improvements that managers need to make to bring sustainable, long-lasting change as service leaders.

## **Hearing and Responding to the Voice of the Child**

- 6.2 Putting children and young people at the centre of all undertakings is central to the new service vision. The proper integration of the voice of the child into the service model now needs to move to a more comprehensive level. In order to take this agenda forward, an external provider, 'The Care Leaders Fellowship' has been commissioned to provide coaching and training to practitioners, so that understanding and responding to the views of young people is embedded in the fabric of the new service, in ways that are clearly demonstrable.
- 6.3 The Care Leaders Fellowship works with local authorities and other agencies to establish the voices and influence of the children they care for and care-experienced children at the heart of their business. The programme which will run during 2021, will involve developing a strong offer for care-experienced children, with bespoke digital platforms and training forums to develop practice, so that all involved in a corporate parenting role better understand how to build and sustain relationships with children.

## **Integrated Front Door**

- 6.4 It is important that an effective and efficient 'front door' to all services is developed and maintained. This includes ensuring that early help provision is properly aligned with the statutory social work activity and these services are therefore joined to provide an integrated front door.
- 6.5 The Integrated Front Door will launch at the end of January 2021, with the following features:
- Creating one pathway within Children's Services for referrals relating to children and young people.
  - Enabling a joined-up approach, with one combined Early Help and Social Care team at the Front Door.

- Children will receive a service proportionate to their needs, in a timely way.
- A reduction in the number of transfer points on the child's journey.
- A reduction in the time from initial contact to outcome.
- Providing a simplified process for the public and professionals.
- Potentially reduce unnecessary social work interventions.

### **Children Looked After and Care Leavers' Strategy**

- 6.6 The new Children Looked After and Care Leavers' Strategy 2020-2024 was agreed by the Cabinet Member for adoption on 17 December 2020.

### **Residential Homes**

- 6.7 The new 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.

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

- 7.1 The Committee is invited to review the material presented in this report and confirm that it is satisfied with the pace and quality of the improvement activity across the Children, Young People & Education Department.

## **8. Consultation**

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

## **9. Risk Implications and Mitigations**

- 9.1 A summary of the risk areas identified in the current risk log, and the associated mitigating factors, is given in the table below:

<b>Risk Area</b>	<b>Examples of Mitigating Actions</b>
The Covid-19 pandemic may continue to impact the delivery of the service in various ways: safeguarding of children must be assured; staff need to be kept safe from infection; protective equipment must be sufficiently available to support face-to-face interaction with children and families, and in residential settings	The service has dealt well with the pandemic to date, as confirmed recently by Ofsted; much learning has resulted, and new ways of working have been developed. This risk is thought to be under control with safeguarding and wellbeing issues soundly catered for.
A surge in demand following the cessation of Covid-19 restrictions, return of children to school etc	As expected, there has been an increase in demand across the service: there has been a rise in MASH contacts; higher caseloads in Assessment & Intervention; and an increased number of children subject to Child Protection Plans as well as

	<p>a continuing rise in Children going into Care. The service planned for these factors in advance, and the situation is under control (as discussed in Section 4). Service Redesign and the new Service Model (Family Safeguarding) will support greater efficiency in the management of future demand.</p>
<p>Knowing that the service is safer for children</p>	<p>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. Again, the service transformation work will further enhance outcomes in the round. The recent Ofsted opinion and DfE intervention provide external assurance of improved service stability in this respect.</p>
<p>Understanding and applying quality practice</p>	<p>A Practice Improvement Plan has been developed to implement quality standards and assurance and will increase in effectiveness in a redesigned workforce.</p>
<p>Multi-agency capacity and capability</p>	<p>The joint undertakings with partners are very strongly stressed in the design principles of the proposed changes and the senior leadership team works with key partners to develop a joined-up approach to service delivery.</p>
<p>Demonstrating to the Commissioner, Ofsted and the DfE that the service can continue its improvement journey</p>	<p>The service has demonstrated to the Commissioner, to Ofsted and the DfE that it has the ambition and capacity for comprehensive change. The Commissioner has signified that he is satisfied with the direction of travel to date. Feedback from the Ofsted Focused Visit in October was further evidence that the service has an accurate self-evaluation, that improvement plans are appropriately focused on key service areas and reasonable progress is being made.</p>
<p>Leadership capacity and capability</p>	<p>New permanent leadership team now fully in place. Leadership has been commended by the Commissioner, Ofsted and the DfE.</p>
<p>Organisational morale &amp; retention of experienced social work staff, in the context of national market scarcity and</p>	<p>This risk is comprehensively addressed in the new Service Redesign proposals and the staff Retention Strategy.</p>

competition from other authorities for their services	
Social workers encumbered with administrative burdens are less effective	Within the Service Redesign the need has been recognised to remove unnecessary administration and to maximise productive professional time with clients. The Integrated Front Door (6.4-6.5) is an example of this principle being operationalised.
Data management not supporting good practice	Using technology to improve service is recognised as a priority; an ICT development workstream is in design, allied to quality improvement. Much has been learned from managing Covid-19 about effective use of technology.
Preparedness for cycle of Ofsted monitoring visits	The senior leadership team maintains regular Ofsted readiness meetings to plan and coordinate the work. The successful Ofsted Focused Visit, as covered in this report (Section 2) demonstrates that these processes are effective.

## **10. Other Options Considered**

10.1 Not applicable – this is a report for information.

## **11. Equality Duty**

11.1 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.

11.2 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.

## **12. Social Value**

12.1 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.

### **13. Crime and Disorder Implications**

- 13.1 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.

### **14. Human Rights Implications**

- 14.1 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.
- 14.2 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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### **Appendices**

Appendix 1: Performance Summary Report to Children First Improvement Board, 10 December 2020, covering the period to the end of November 2020.

### **Background Papers**

None