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

Introduction

- 1 During this time of national emergency, it is more important than ever that all of us concerned with strength and continuity in the delivery of public services, remain in close contact. Accordingly, I am taking this opportunity to present to members the latest operational position regarding Children's Services in West Sussex.
- 2 We in Children's Services are absolutely clear that we must maintain three vital functions at this time: we must ensure that our safeguarding work remains really strong; we must take great care that staff carrying out this work are properly supported and protected; and we must, notwithstanding the first two, ensure that our service improvement work continues.

Covid-19

- 3 In common with the County Council's total response on Coronavirus, Children's Services has put in place the necessary procedures to ensure that we retain effective service capability. A letter explaining the measures being taken was sent to all members on 20 March. This set out our arrangements for risk-rating the most vulnerable children and families; and ensuring that we have a clear daily view of our staffing strength in each area, allowing us to consider redeploying people into key roles as needed. The safety and wellbeing of staff remains an absolute priority, and I salute the dedication of those who are experiencing challenging conditions as key workers.
- 4 We fully understand that social isolation, while a challenge to all of us, may present more acute problems for the vulnerable families we serve. It is essential that social workers can stay in touch with their families, even if direct physical contact is not always possible. I have been hearing about innovative and resourceful strategies being used to achieve this – demonstrating the adaptability and ingenuity of our workforce.
- 5 The overall staffing position remains satisfactory, and all key roles are being covered. Immediate tasks include ensuring the safety and welfare of vulnerable families, working closely with schools on educational provision both for vulnerable children and the children of key workers, and securing the availability of protective equipment for social workers.

Children's Services Leadership

- 6 Lucy Butler, the new Director of Children's Services, and Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning has just commenced her role, from 2nd April. This is certainly the most challenging time possible to be starting as the head of a critical service, but I am confident that Lucy will provide strong, inspirational leadership to build on our achievements to date. I am delighted to be welcoming Lucy to West Sussex, and I know that all members, partners and staff will give her their fullest support. I am grateful to AnnMarie Dodds for covering this role in the interim period.

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- 7 Jackie Wood, our Assistant Director for Corporate Parenting has sadly had to leave the service for health reasons, and we thank her for her tireless work over the past year in improving our standards of care in this crucial area, and we wish her well for the future. We have engaged an interim successor to Jackie, who is Shirley Gounder.

Corporate Parenting Panel

- 8 Jackie's influence has been especially felt in enhancing the work of the Corporate Parenting Panel. At its last meeting on 12th March, I was very pleased to see positive engagement from the young people present, and I feel that the Panel is addressing the important responsibilities we all share, with increasing effectiveness: hearing and responding to the voice of the child is a key part of this.

Engagement with Young People

- 9 Ever since I have been Cabinet Member, I have set great store by visiting the frontline, and active face-to-face engagement with all our stakeholders – not least with the young people. Before the current restrictions took hold, I was fortunate to be able to meet the new Youth Cabinet and hear about the many plans that are in place for a more pro-active engagement with our youth cohort. These will take many forms, including Youth takeover days, speed debating, the annual debate in the Chamber, and shadow-a-cabinet member days. Some of these may need to be put on hold for the time being, but we will make all the use we can of digital communication to stay in touch with our young people. I am conscious how important it is at this time that they continue to feel confident that we are 'there' for them.

A Celebration of Foster Care

- 10 It was a particular pleasure for me to attend the annual Foster Carer Recognition event, which took place on 29th February at the Avisford Hotel, Arundel. This celebration of fostering offered foster carers and fostering workers the chance to come together for an enjoyable and well-deserved social event. This was organised by the WSCC Foster Carers Association (UFCA) and supported by our Fostering Service. The celebration was well attended by foster carers and staff from the Fostering Service.
- 11 This was a welcome opportunity to thank foster carers for the immense contribution that they make to improving the life opportunities and outcomes for the children that they care for. Carers who have fostered for West Sussex County Council for over 20 years, together with those who had completed the fostering diploma, were awarded with a certificate and trophy or gift.

Children's Trust

- 12 Members will recall that the County Council received a statutory direction from the Department for Education (DfE) to make provision for the setting up of a Children's Trust, in order to ensure that the necessary improvements to Children's Services can be achieved in an appropriate organisational environment. The effect of this would be to remove Children's Services from the County Council's direct control.

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- 13 To progress this programme, the County Council is required to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding with the DfE. This in itself does not finally commit the parties to a Trust model, but enables the Council to meet its legal obligations up to this point. Understandably there will be some slippage in this process due to the current national situation, and discussions with the DfE are in progress to agree a revised timetable. I will bring a fuller briefing to all members in due course.

Ofsted Monitoring Visit

- 14 As part of the journey of improvement, Ofsted is undertaking a programme of short, focused monitoring visits on a quarterly basis, which is intended to culminate in a full-service re-inspection in 2021. The monitoring visit originally scheduled for the second week of May will not now take place but will be rescheduled as and when the current emergency arrangements allow.

The Children First Practice Improvement Plan

- 15 The detailed service development work now being undertaken is set out in a Practice Improvement Plan. The original plan was adopted in August 2019 and was 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, to recognise that this is a 'living document' and to reflect the efforts made so far; accordingly, a refreshed Improvement Plan was adopted in March 2020.

High Trees Ofsted Inspection Result

- 16 Members may be aware that High Trees in Ifield, Crawley is one of our children's homes, providing residential short breaks or longer-term care for children and young people with a severe or moderate learning disability. I am delighted to report that, following a recent inspection, High Trees has formally been rated 'Good' by Ofsted in a report that is full of praise.
- 17 The Inspectors commented that the manager, Lianne Finch "has excellent relationships with a wide range of professionals. Without exception, feedback from educators and social workers is highly complimentary about the care and the management of the home and the impact on the young people's lives this service continues to deliver." The staff "support the young people to develop their independence irrespective of any disability they have.....and show ambition for learning and help the young people to value education". This fine result is a huge tribute to the excellent work of Lianne and her team, and I offer them my congratulations. It follows on from the 'Outstanding' rating achieved by Orchard House last year, illustrating the growing quality of our children's homes.

Strengthening the Workforce

- 18 As stated in previous updates, building a resilient Children's workforce, fully motivated and resourced to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people and their families, remains a key priority. I am pleased to say that the current position remains satisfactory, as the following indicators show:

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- The Vacancy gap improvement has been maintained at 4.3% (down from 5.1% in February), having been 18.5% in February 2019;
 - This outcome is supported by a Recruitment and Retention offer, which has been taken up by around 92% of eligible staff;
 - The qualified Social Worker workforce includes 17.8% of agency worker posts 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 continuing to have a positive impact on reducing high caseloads: the latest overall average caseloads across the teams are 16.3 for Experienced social workers, and 8.6 for the Newly Qualified. We are intent upon sustaining this improvement, while ensuring that social workers have the necessary technical, administrative and pastoral support, particularly through the current difficulties;
 - As of January 2020, 94% of social work staff have management support arrangements in place through formal supervision: this is an important ingredient of sound working and the maintenance of quality.

Summary

19 The current situation gives us an unprecedented set of challenges. However, I am confident that together we can overcome these difficulties and take our service improvement forward. I am so pleased that this update provides many items of genuinely good news at this difficult time. I urge you to take pride in and celebrate our successes, large and small. Once again, I am privileged to be able to thank our staff, our partners and all our members for their outstanding service.

With my best wishes for your continued good health, and a joyful Easter.

Jacquie Russell

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

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For information