
Ofsted Inspection Judgement of Children's Services and the County Council's Children First Practice Improvement Plan

Background and Context

- 1** Following the Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) inspection of the County Council's Children's Social Care Services in February 2019, an 'inadequate' judgement was given in Ofsted's report published on 8 May 2019.
- 2** The judgement listed 12 aspects of the service requiring improvement. The relevant issues can be summarised as: social worker recruitment and caseload volumes; the quality and consistency of social work practice; management oversight; systems and processes; the timely provision of services; permanency for children looked after; care planning and recording; the involvement of partners; the corporate parenting function.

Responding to the Ofsted Judgement

- 3** The County Council is now required, in responding to the judgement, to prepare a Practice Improvement Plan that demonstrates its ability and capacity to improve children's services to a satisfactory standard.
- 4** Arising from the inspection judgement, the Department for Education will be issuing a statutory direction to the County Council and a Commissioner will be appointed by the Secretary of State to oversee the Council's response. The Improvement Plan is the fundamental mechanism to initiate recovery from an 'inadequate' judgement.
- 5** The Children First Practice Improvement Plan will receive formal approval from the Cabinet and the Children's Improvement Board, in advance of its submission to the Department for Education and Ofsted at the end of June. It will also have received scrutiny from the Children and Young People's Services Select Committee and the Health and Wellbeing Board. Ofsted will initially advise whether the Plan suitably reflects the findings of the inspection report. The Council will work closely with the Commissioner on the development and delivery of the Improvement Plan and it will be for the Commissioner to monitor and direct the Council in relation to the Plan.
- 6** The Commissioner will, over the course of three months, determine whether the Council's Improvement Plan and the actions to be taken to deliver it are deemed to be effective: this decision will be taken approximately six months following the publication of the Ofsted report. The outcome of this process will inform the Commissioner's recommendation to the Secretary of State in relation to whether the County Council should retain responsibility for the direct provision of children's social care services.
- 7** Subsequent to a successful adoption of the agreed Plan, the anticipated service improvements will be confirmed through a sequence of roughly quarterly Ofsted monitoring visits that are expected to commence in autumn 2019, as determined between Ofsted and the Director of Children's Services.

These will culminate in a re-inspection of the service, probably during 2020/21.

Delivering the Improvement Plan for Children's Services

- 8** The Children First Practice Improvement Plan to be submitted is intended to address all the issues identified in the inspection. The County Council commits itself to raising the standards of children's services as its top priority, and this will be backed with the necessary focus and resource. The voice of the child will be central to the Improvement Plan and the programme of service transformation it represents. It is intended that the Plan will fully engage and command the confidence of service users, staff and partners, and the West Sussex public.
- 9** The delivery of service improvements has already commenced, with a range of measures put in hand. These include:
 - Setting up a Children's Improvement Board, with an independent chair, to review and challenge the Improvement Plan;
 - Strengthening the role of the Corporate Parenting Panel, and its function of leading and monitoring best practice;
 - Investment of £5m to increase the number of social workers from November 2018, with a further £5m allocated to the Improvement Plan;
 - A Recruitment and Retention programme to ensure that good quality social workers can be welcomed to, and remain in West Sussex – this has already resulted, since February 2019, in over 50 permanent social workers commencing work, or with an agreed start date; retention levels for existing staff are improving, supported by the retention programme;
 - A continuing programme to address the quality of practice: already in hand are measures to improve the identification of neglect; a review to improve quality in children's residential homes; and improvements to practice standards and data quality; and
 - Setting out a major training and development programme for staff, to improve social work practice.
- 10** The Leader and Cabinet Member intend to provide a monthly update to the Council on the progress in the delivery of the Children First Practice Improvement Plan.

For information

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