

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee
4 June 2020
Children First Improvement – Service Update
Report by the 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 04 March 2020. It notes the key service objectives and the new leadership arrangements (Section 1); it summarises the service's response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Section 2); it provides the latest monitoring information on workforce development (Section 3); and it explains what service improvement work has been continuing during this period (Section 4); there is a summary of key future decisions (Section 5). A separate report on Neglect forms Part b) of this agenda item.

The focus for Scrutiny

The Committee is requested to:

- a) consider the update on the improvement work as outlined in Sections 2, 3 & 4 of the report and whether this demonstrates sufficient progress on the improvement journey;
- b) consider the risks as set out in section 8 and whether the mitigating actions are robust.

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

1. Update on Service Developments

Introduction

- 1.1 This report reviews a period unprecedented in the service's history. An account is given in Section 2 below of the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the delivery of the service. However, we continue to make progress and focus relentlessly on meeting the needs of vulnerable children, young people and their families, both in the course of our normal practice and in our response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Notwithstanding the challenges this has presented, the service has continued to hold fast to three central tenets:

- a) the safeguarding of children and young people must remain strong;
- b) staff must be properly supported and protected;
- c) the planned service improvement work must continue.

This report seeks to explain how all three of these have been achieved during the period under review.

Leadership and Management in Children's Services

- 1.2 Lucy Butler, the new Director of Children's Services, and Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning commenced her role on 2 April. Louise Warren, Senior Improvement Lead is currently acting as the Assistant Director for Corporate Parenting pending permanent recruitment to this position. The new Children First Transformation Director, Vince Clark, started on 4 May.

2. Covid-19 Pandemic and Service Response

- 2.1 This section summarises the service response to Covid-19 during the period up to the middle of May. The virus has presented the service with significant challenges, especially since it is recognised that 'lock-down' and social isolation have a disproportionate impact on families that are intrinsically vulnerable. It is essential that the service continues to have direct knowledge of and regular assurance about any children who may be potentially at risk, and the management focus has been on ensuring that staff are able to achieve this in a safe yet verifiable way. We have put in place a full set of Covid-19 arrangements to ensure our staff are working to keep our children safe, and they have been innovative in their use of digital technology to provide this.
- 2.2 The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People's address to the County Council meeting originally scheduled for 22 May contains further detail about the service response. Prior to this, the Cabinet Member wrote to all members on 20 March outlining the initial approach to the challenge of safeguarding children during the crisis. This described a comprehensive risk assessment of children's vulnerability, and a programme of actual and virtual visits focussed on the clearly identified highest priorities.
- 2.3 To summarise the current position:
- High operational staffing levels (90% or more) have been maintained throughout the most serious period of the pandemic;
 - The service has adhered to all guidance received from government and professional social care and health bodies, and adjusted local policy and practice accordingly;
 - Staff have continued to receive the latest advice, guidance and support;
 - Supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) have remained satisfactory to meet all specified needs for face-to-face visiting;
 - Risk assessments and RAG rating has been undertaken on all open cases to children's social care to ensure that managers retain effective oversight of risk, enabling us to continue to offer help, protection and support, either virtually or face-to-face;
 - The face-to-face visiting policy now covers all children on child protection plans, those children not known to the service who need an assessment, and for progress visits where this is judged necessary. We are seeing a gradual increase in the number of face to face visits completed, increasing

from 108 visits (21.3% of all visits completed for the week ending 15 April 2020) to 485 (53.2% of all visits completed for the week ending 20 May 2020). During the month of April as a whole, 5,442 visits were completed, including 1,326 (24.4%) face to face visits and 2,896 (53.2%) virtual visits. A tick box on the visiting form was introduced on the 8 April 2020 to capture how the visit was completed, either virtually or face to face. Prior to this date 1,220 visits (22.4%) were undertaken where it isn't recorded how the visit was completed.

- Use of digital technology has been effective, and many young people have responded very positively to this approach, preferring to keep in touch with their social worker or personal advisor by text, WhatsApp, or video calls. We have noticed that many young people are much more responsive to this approach, so that visits are more productive and are able to be held more frequently, with staff able to keep in touch between formal visits. However, it is not suitable for all, especially younger children, but as part of our recovery plan we are carefully considering how we can take this learning into our new normal;
- A testing regime for Covid-19 is in place for social care staff and is providing greater assurance and a sounder base for continued operational practice;
- As experienced regionally and nationally, referrals to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) decreased sharply from an average of 235 contacts per day to an average of 92 contacts per day during the first week of lockdown, (a 60% reduction). In particular there has been a notable reduction in contacts from schools, accounting for 23% of all contacts in March, compared to 8% in April. Similarly, there has been a slight reduction in contacts from Health, reducing from 18% in March to 15% in April. However, we are pleased to see an improving picture; in the week ending 15 May 2020 there were an average of 148 contacts a day (a 37% decrease on pre-lockdown contacts). Together with our partners we are now planning for a surge in activity once lockdown begins to ease, so ensuring that we have the right capacity in place to meet likely demand.

Engaging the whole community to keep children safe

- 2.3 At this time when vulnerable families may be under even greater pressure due to social isolation, financial worries and enforced inertia, and with a rise in incidents of domestic violence being reported nationally, it is more important than ever that the entire community is mobilised to keep children safe. This is the purpose of the recent press release [if-you-see-something-say-something](https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/news/if-you-see-something-say-something-to-protect-the-county-s-children/) (<https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/news/if-you-see-something-say-something-to-protect-the-county-s-children/>) that was issued on behalf of the Cabinet Member, jointly with partners in Sussex Police and Health. Members are encouraged to promote this message, drawing attention to the reporting channels and the work of the West Sussex Safeguarding Children Partnership.

3. Children's Services Workforce Update

This section considers trends from February 2019 together with the latest Workforce information, dated 4 May 2020.

Vacancy Gap

3.1 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%
▪ February 2020	5.3%
▪ March 2020	5.1%
▪ April 2020	4.3%
▪ May 2020	1.9%

3.2 The vacancy gap has improved to 1.9% and is predicted to remain at a similar level over the summer. The position has benefited from some staff withdrawing their notice in response to the current crisis. The number of absent employees has decreased since last month and is currently 25.5 FTE (compared to 29.9 FTE in April); 17.5 FTE of these are due to career breaks or maternity leave. There are currently no staff suspended, and the 8 FTE on long-term sick leave is another monthly decrease, this time of 3.1 FTE compared with the previous month.

Starters and Leavers

3.3 The table below shows the current full-time equivalent numbers of expected starters and leavers between May and July 2020. The Covid-19 crisis is clearly influencing behaviours, and some resignations have been deferred or withdrawn. It remains important that this situation is closely monitored and responded to, as it may mask future 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
May 2020	3.0	4.1
June 2020	6.0	3.0
July 2020	0	5.8
Net minus for period		3.9

Agency Workers

3.4 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 17.7% of the total qualified social worker establishment; the recent detailed trend in terms of full-time equivalent 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
▪ February 2020	70.8 FTE
▪ April 2020	78.4 FTE
▪ May 2020	79.0 FTE

Recruitment & Retention Offer

3.5 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 the Council for 18 months. The data excludes the ASYEs (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment, 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 2020	92.0%
▪ February 2020	92.0%
▪ March 2020	91.0%
▪ April 2020	92.0%
▪ May 2020	92.0%

Caseloads

3.6 The Committee has previously noted the centrality of achieving manageable caseloads across the service. Caseload targets were set in 2018 and were determined by comparisons 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 (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment) 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 in.

- 3.7 Caseloads are monitored weekly. At present, the only service area that has an average caseload over 18 is Family Support & Protection North (18.4). While there has been a marked decrease in *average* caseload during recent months, it is acknowledged there are individual workers within teams whose caseload is above the target level of 18 cases.
- 3.8 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

- 3.9 To summarise, the current workforce situation is inevitably impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. Sustaining the positive effects previously reported will be challenging, especially in the face of increasing uncertainty for the workforce, and in the context of a continued national scarcity of experienced social workers. However, we continue to invest heavily in our Social Work Academy to attract newly qualified social workers. Staff behaviours in the aftermath of current restrictions are not fully predictable. Another factor could be a surge in customer demand that may follow a release of lock-down, and consequent impact on workloads.
- 3.10 Key to maintaining a low vacancy gap will be the retention of the existing workforce: some volatility is to be expected, and this remains an area of risk. 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.

4. Key Service Initiatives

Children's Services Improvement Board & Ofsted Monitoring

- 4.1 Oversight of the Improvement programme continues through the Children's Services Improvement Board, under the chairmanship of the Commissioner for Children's Services in West Sussex, John Coughlan. Concurrently, a Children's Improvement Partnership Board represents the full range of stakeholders of the service. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a rescheduling of the programme of quarterly Ofsted Monitoring Visits is under consideration. The relationship with Hampshire County Council as West Sussex's Partner in Practice is proceeding constructively and to the benefit of the service.
- 4.2 As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Ofsted has temporarily ceased normal inspection activity and in April made an offer to several local authorities to redeploy its inspectors. The purpose of this is to assist local authorities to deliver help and support to vulnerable children during these challenging times. West Sussex County Council currently has four of Her Majesty's

Inspectors (HMIs) seconded to the service, three of whom have education backgrounds and one with a social care background. They have been working with the County Council since 4 May 2020.

The Children First Practice Improvement Plan

- 4.3 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 was required, to recognise that this is a 'living document' and to reflect the programme of work accomplished to date. Accordingly, a refreshed Improvement Plan was adopted in March 2020, and forms a sound base for the next phase of improvement work.

Continued Practice Improvement

- 4.6 Notwithstanding the challenges faced, the journey of service improvement has continued. Under the Improvement Plan, a bedrock of practice standards is being created, that will be progressively trained into the service; some key milestones that have recently been achieved, are as follows:
- The Quality Assurance Framework has now been revised and signed off with a streamlined audit tool, with the focus now on embedding audit as a tool to improve the quality of practice;
 - Work is taking place on a Practice Framework to promote a more strengths-based approach to work with children and families;
 - Work has been commissioned to support improved practice in Family Support & Protection;
 - Permanency improvement is moving forward, with supporting panels now introduced to ensure timely decisions to achieve permanence for children unable to live within their birth family;
 - Governance arrangements are now in place within the service to oversee learning, delivery and outcomes, e.g. the Policy and Practice Group and Performance Board.

Children's Residential Care

- 4.7 The Council's residential provision for children is in a period of very positive development. High Trees in Ifield, Crawley is a children's home, providing residential short breaks or longer-term care for children and young people with a severe or moderate learning disability. Following a recent inspection, High Trees has formally been rated 'Good' by Ofsted in a report that is full of praise for the manager, Lianne Finch and her team. This follows on from the 'Outstanding' rating achieved by Orchard House last year, illustrating the growing quality of the Council's children's homes.
- 4.7 The agreed Children's Residential Strategy aims to ensure that outcomes for vulnerable children are maximized, while long-term care costs are sensibly managed. Under a programme of remodelling work now commencing, the

homes currently closed are expected to re-open early in 2021. **May House** in Worthing will provide emergency accommodation for children with complex needs; **Seaside** at Shoreham will offer placements for children at risk of entering the care system; and **Cissbury Lodge** in Worthing will once again care for vulnerable children, supporting those with a learning disability and complex health needs. All this is good news for the service and for delivering first-rate sustainable in-house facilities.

5. Key Future Decisions

Children Looked After and Care Leavers' Strategy 2020-2024

- 5.1 This Strategy represents a key aspect of improving the County Council's services to children and young people. An update of the current Strategy (2018-21) is necessary, following the Ofsted inspection, to ensure a strategic approach and evidence the commitment to ensuring that children who are looked after by the authority are happy, healthy, and safe and have the opportunity to achieve their full potential. The new Strategy is now expected for adoption in June. It is anticipated that the Corporate Parenting Panel will examine the strategy document prior to the decision by the Cabinet Member.

Children's Trust

- 5.2 The Committee 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 could 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.
- 5.3 To progress this programme, the County Council is required to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) 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. As set out in the Council's Forward Plan, the next steps are:
- Cabinet is due to agree the proposed scope of services to be included in the proposed Trust, and the programme of work for the establishment of the Trust and other critical aspects of the project which need to be included in the MoU. This decision is provisionally scheduled for July 2020, and is intended to be the subject of scrutiny, jointly between this Committee and the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee, on a date to be agreed.
 - This would lead to a procurement process to appoint a contractor to manage the process of establishing the West Sussex Children's Trust and the transfer of the agreed services to that Trust.
- 5.4 The original timetable anticipated a Children's Trust being in place by December 2020. There will be some slippage in this timetable due to the current national situation, thought likely to be of 3-6 months. Discussions with the DfE are in progress to agree a revised timetable, and an update will be brought to this Committee in due course. It is likely that the revised timeline will also have an

impact on when the proposed scope of services will be agreed, and the governance timeline will be updated accordingly.

Children First Strategic Approach

- 5.5 The Committee has previously been briefed on this strategic initiative, which will set out the direction and commitment for how partners in West Sussex will deliver a shared vision for children and young people, placing children at the heart of all we do. Its adoption is intended for a Cabinet decision in September 2020, and to be the subject of scrutiny jointly between this Committee and the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee, on a date to be agreed.

6. Issues for consideration by the Scrutiny Committee

Detailed examination of key service areas

- 6.1 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.
- 6.2 The topic for this meeting is the work recently undertaken on **Neglect**, which is presented in the report under Part b) of this agenda item. The Committee's request to receive more child-focussed measures has been noted, and it is hoped that this subject will be a step towards meeting this acknowledged need.
- 6.3 At the meeting on 4 March, the Committee expressed a wish to be involved in the Practice Week, an event then being planned. Due to the national situation, this particular event had to be postponed, but it is intended that replacement events will be rescheduled at a later date in September. The same consideration applies to the wish members expressed to be invited to a future meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel.

7. Consultation

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

8. Risk Implications and Mitigations

- 8.1 For an undertaking of the magnitude of Children's Services, it is natural that there will be a wide range of risks, both relating to the service improvement agenda and more widely. These have been heightened by the current crisis. 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
The Covid-19 Pandemic may 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	These risks, their mitigation and the current delivery of the service are described in detail in this report (Section 2)
A possible surge in demand following the cessation of the current Covid-19 restrictions	Service planning is in place for this eventuality
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 the use of technology: it is a whole-system issue. Specific measures include having a new quality assurance process, with a Head of Quality Assurance in post to ensure effective management oversight
Understanding and applying quality practice	Practice Improvement Project in progress to implement quality standards and assurance (see e.g. para 4.6 of this report)
Multi-agency capacity and capability	Partnership Engagement Project being delivered under Children First; Strategic Approach in preparation with partner involvement (see para 5.5)
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/Partnership Boards active; new leadership team fully functional; Workforce issues being resolved; Children First Strategic Approach in preparation; County Council engaged in very constructive relationship with DfE, Ofsted and Hampshire CC 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 and 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 monitoring 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 actions; close liaison with Ofsted; December 2019 visit and outcomes satisfactory

9. Other Options Considered

9.1 Not applicable – this is a report for information.

10. Equality Duty

10.1 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.

10.2 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.

11. Social Value

11.1 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.

12. Crime and Disorder Implications

12.1 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.

13. Human Rights Implications

- 13.1 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.
- 13.2 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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Background Papers - None