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

Introduction

- 1** I am writing with a further update to all members to coincide with the County Council meeting on 18 September. Children's Services is now ready to enter a period of accelerated development: we are building a culture geared to high standards, and will be able recognise when we are achieving these; we are designing a comprehensive employment Offer for social workers that will make West Sussex a highly competitive and rewarding place to work; we are creating an efficient staffing structure in which roles and accountabilities are clear; and we are introducing a new service model that will offer significantly improved effectiveness and efficiency. All these things support good outcomes for our children and young people, and a service we can again be proud of.
- 2** Meanwhile, our Covid-19 Recovery programme remains strong. Face-to-face visits are increasing. Staff have returned to the office where a 'business critical' need arises, and in a safe manner. Safeguarding referrals have broadly stabilized to pre-Covid levels, and we are confident that our safeguarding intelligence remains strong; having said that, we can expect higher reporting of issues now that schools have reopened, and have planned to accommodate a general increase in caseload volumes.

Our Vision

- 3** Everything we aspire to achieve is encapsulated in this statement that has been adopted within the service:

The West Sussex approach puts the child first. We work with children, families, communities, our partners and each other in a restorative, strength-based way. Strong Relationships are at the heart of what we do.

I draw constant inspiration from the principles flowing from this statement, and I urge all members to take this approach to heart, as they come into regular contact with their constituents and with our partners around the county.

Leadership and Management in Children's Services

- 4** I am pleased to report that Lucy Butler, the Director of Children's Services and Executive Director Children, Young People and Learning has made further permanent senior appointments to consolidate her leadership team. Having permanent management in place represents a springboard from which the next stage of service transformation can be undertaken with confidence. The new appointments will take effect during October and November, as follows:

Linda Steele, Assistant Director, Safeguarding, Quality and Practice
Daniel Ruaux, Assistant Director, Corporate Parenting
Jenny Boyd, Assistant Director, Social Care
Darlington Ihenacho, Principal Social Worker

Ofsted, Commissioner & Children's Trust

- 5** Ofsted has signified that its programme of monitoring visits will resume shortly. At

the time of the writing we do not have definite dates for our next visit, but based on the evidence I have seen since becoming Cabinet Member, I believe that the service is ready to face further scrutiny.

- 6 Members again had an opportunity on 3 September to hear directly from the Commissioner for Children's Services in West Sussex, John Coughlan. It is clear that the Commissioner, who reports to the Department for Education (DfE), has formed a favourable view of the Council's commitment to change, and the energy we have shown in taking the Children's Services improvement agenda forward so far, and he endorses our direction of travel.
- 7 In regard to the Children's Trust, the next stage of the process is for the County Council to agree the detail of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the DfE. The MoU will define the scope of any Trust that may subsequently take responsibility for the delivery of Children's Services in West Sussex. This matter will be considered by Cabinet on 18 October, preceded on 8 October by a cross-cutting Scrutiny Task and Finish Group of members drawn jointly from the Children and Young People's Services and Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committees.

Being a Good Service – and a Good Place to Work

- 8 This Autumn will see a period of significant service development, as we put in place the key components for the kind of service our children deserve. As previously noted, the factors absolutely critical to success are: (1) the way in which management and staffing structures promote efficiency and effectiveness; (2) having the best professional practice standards that we can; and (3) ensuring that high-quality staff are valued within the organisation, and wish to develop their careers with us in West Sussex. Therefore, we are approaching a redesign and simplification of post structures and pay grades, which will allow us to deploy staff resources more effectively. The service will adopt a new Practice Model, known as 'Family Safeguarding', and I will explain more about this as the process unfolds.
- 9 To replace the current staff Recruitment and Retention scheme, due to expire at the end of November 2020, a new remuneration package is being finalised. The intention is to give West Sussex a structured and competitive place in the social work employment market, with a remuneration package in line with those authorities that are our competitors. Staff will have balanced caseloads; good and reflective supervision and support will be in place; staff will have the right resources to hand and make the best use of technology to maximise their own effectiveness.

Residential Redevelopment Programme

- 10 The timetable for redeveloping our in-house residential facilities has inevitably experienced some slippage due to Covid-19, but progress remains satisfactory. Work commenced at the beginning of September at **Cissbury Lodge** in Worthing, and contracts have recently been awarded for **May House** in Worthing and **Seaside** at Shoreham. We now anticipate that all these homes will be ready to reopen during February to March 2021. The prospect of a return to full capacity is very welcome, and will help us to obtain the best outcomes for vulnerable children, while managing demand more effectively in this crucial part of our work, and in line with our Residential Strategy. In Phase 2 of the programme, our three open homes (Orchard House, High Trees and Teasel Close), are currently being assessed as to feasibility for further development, and I will provide an update in due course.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

11 I wanted to draw attention to an important issue affecting authorities in the South East – that of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, or UASC. It is the case that West Sussex – both through Gatwick Airport and more informal ‘lorry drops’ – is regularly involved in supporting unaccompanied children who have asylum applications to the UK. Our colleagues in Kent and Portsmouth in particular are also closely involved in managing UASC cases through overseeing other points of entry into the country. West Sussex maintains very close co-operation with these authorities, and we are signed up to the National Transfer Scheme. Since June we have taken six unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from Kent. While we will always strive to assist our colleagues in this way, we must necessarily maintain some capacity with our provider system to meet needs arising within West Sussex. I wanted to assure members that we are committed to giving as much support to Kent and Portsmouth as it is possible for us to do.

Conclusion

12 I believe that the service stands on the brink of a major step towards achieving the quality we all wish to see. Nonetheless, this is an undertaking of considerable challenge and complexity, which I view as a journey of improvement lasting 12 to 18 months. I am sure that all members of the Council will share my resolve that this journey will reach its destination successfully.

Youth Cabinet

13 I am delighted to end this update by introducing once again a message from Daisy, the Chair of our Youth Cabinet. Once again, I am amazed by the energy displayed and the range of excellent work being undertaken: these young people are an inspiration to us all.

With my best wishes for your continued good health.

For information

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Statement from the Chair of West Sussex Youth Cabinet

September 2020

The West Sussex Youth Cabinet has been extremely busy this month, preparing, organising and assessing all of their campaigns, as well as the future of the cabinet itself.

All of our campaigns are up and running at the moment, covering three very relevant topics for young people in West Sussex: Mental health, environment, and West Sussex tackles racial inequality. Within each campaign, there are separate project organisation groups; all of these groups have been working tirelessly to get as much done in our campaigns as possible before they return to school.

Our Mental Health campaign is being run under the umbrella of the youth cabinet's wellbeing charity, 'Free Your Mind'. We are aiming to create a campaign that not only challenges the stigma around mental health but also reflects the needs of the West Sussex youth. The blog that has been set up, which allows young people to submit pieces of writing about their experiences with mental health, has been a real hit, and we've had several young people get in touch and share their thanks for creating an anonymous space to share. The group that was originally working on organising an online event has re-focussed their attention towards reaching out to more people in West Sussex; through the use of schools and social media the youth cabinet will be consulting young people throughout the county about what they would find most beneficial. It's been lovely for the youth cabinet members involved to see and hear what sort of difference they're making to people's lives.

Our environment campaign has made incredible progress in the past few weeks. The team of youth cabinet members organised some beach clean-ups in September. They worked incredibly hard to ensure that a safe and accessible event could be promised to the communities involved, so that Bognor, Littlehampton, Worthing and Pagham beaches could receive a good litter pick. It's been very impressive watching the members of this group go through the process of risk assessments, logistical planning and organising COVID-19 restrictions so professionally. It is a great accomplishment for the whole cabinet to be announcing our first event of the term. Similarly, the social media group has done a brilliant job of rounding up videos from all the cabinet members that explain ways to live more sustainably. These will go out soon.

The Racial Inequality campaign, which we've launched in light of recent global events, is growing more every day. The most prominent section of this campaign is going to be an online webinar which will span over three days in October, Black History Month. Each hour and a half session will have a series of speakers discussing various topics, culture, religion, history and personal experiences included. This event is striving to educate people of all ages about the history of racial inequality in the UK, as well as on the numerous cultures that exist globally. Once the event is complete, the cabinet will be getting in touch with schools about ways to implement more culturally and racially diverse history into schools, whether that is through the curriculum, PSHE or clubs. The social media campaign group is creating an assortment of posts that will continuously go out with facts about other cultures, religions and traditions. The Racial Inequality campaign is sensitive and needs care, compassion and understanding in its foundations for it to be done correctly. The youth cabinet has done an exceptional job in exercising that.

Outside of our campaigns, we have just completed all of the initial cabinet member meetings, which enables our young people to work with the cabinet members of their choice over Zoom. All the feedback has been excellent, and copious plans are being made to get the cabinet and the youth cabinet working more closely in the future. An example of this is Nigel Jupp, the cabinet member for education and skills, who is working with us to collect feedback about going back to school. This is ensuring that young people in West Sussex have a voice about the way they are feeling, emotionally and physically as well as what can be done to help in light of schools returning.

The youth cabinet has been especially busy this month, but it has to be said that every single member has made an effort in making sure our campaigns run smoothly. So here's to another month!