

Cllr Jacquie Russell
Cabinet Member for Children and Young
People

03302 223695 (Direct)
jacquie.russell@westsussex.gov.uk

www.westsussex.gov.uk

West Wing
County Hall
Chichester
West Sussex
PO19 1RQ



2 December 2020

Cllr Stephen Hillier
Chairman
Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

Dear Stephen,

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee – Children First Improvement Programme

Thank you for your letter of 12th November 2020, with the recommendations from the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee (CYPSSC) meeting on 5th November.

I would like to take this opportunity to say how much both I and the service value your Committee's scrutiny of the progress being made on the Children First Improvement programme and the feedback and recommendations that emerge. Having been in regular attendance at the Committee's meetings, I feel that the Scrutiny function is being undertaken in a searching and robust manner and that the concerns originally expressed on this subject in the Commissioner's report are being addressed.

Your public assessment of progress will provide important assurance that we are on the right track and also identify areas requiring further attention. The role of Scrutiny will continue to be essential as the service redesign phase of the improvement journey unfolds and I look forward to your continued participation in this process. I am always mindful that it is in relation to the impact on the safety and wellbeing of children and young people that all our efforts should be judged.

I now respond to each of the Committee's recommendations in turn:

1. Scrutiny Committee is satisfied that the evidence provided demonstrates progress is being made on the improvement journey and improving outcomes for children and young people.

The Committee's overall endorsement of the progress being made is extremely welcome. Your view supports my own perception, although as I stressed at County Council recently, there is still a lot of work to do in order to build the service we all wish to see. We will shortly receive a formal view from Ofsted following their recent visit, which will add further substance to our internal assessment and I look forward to discussing this with the Committee.

2. The Committee highlights the importance of partnership working to ensure the best outcomes for children and families and requests that this continues to be a key area of focus and recognised area of risk.

I am entirely in agreement with the Committee's view. Work to develop an energised partnership undertaking is indeed an area of primary focus and I summarise below the arrangements in place to give effect to this.

i) Overseeing partnership delivery for children's services

We now have strong mechanisms to articulate and coordinate the partnership work in children's services. To oversee the partnership improvement programme arising from the Ofsted judgement, the **Children's Improvement Partnership Board** is chaired by the Commissioner for Children's Services and attended by Police, Schools, Health and District Council representatives. To address all aspects of continuing service delivery there is the **Children First Board**, a sub-group of the Health and Wellbeing Board and reporting to it, which is chaired by myself as Cabinet Member for Children and Young People. This has an appropriately broad base of membership, which also includes representatives of children and young people, their parents and carers, schools and colleges and the community and voluntary organisations that make such a vital contribution to our combined work at a local level.

The other key partnership body is the **Children's Safeguarding Partnership**, operating on a pan-Sussex basis, which has high-quality collaborative arrangements in place. The main practice priorities and activities of the Partnership are:

1. **Neglect:** A multi-agency action plan to drive improvement forward is overseen by the Neglect Working Group, supported by practice toolkits, and with the voice of the child embedded.
2. **Child exploitation:** a pan-Sussex strategy has been developed, supported by robust information-sharing; understanding patterns of exploitation in Sussex and promoting professional investigative skills.
3. **Effective multi-agency safeguarding practice:** promoting a range of practice improvement standards across the partnership, including the ICON programme to prevent abusive head trauma in infants, and a project to work with fathers; publishing and learning from Serious Case Reviews.

The overarching strategic priorities and activities are:

4. **Lead and consolidate effective partnership arrangements:** partnership governance has been independently scrutinised, leading to additional subgroups and revisions of membership to align with best practice.

5. **Revise and embed a Learning and Improvement Framework:** a new Quality Assurance and Scrutiny Framework has been agreed to share and evaluate learning and skills across the partnership.

ii) An example of the context for partnership collaboration

It may be useful to offer an example of how partners can collaborate on particular issues to maximise impact. The Children's Improvement Partnership Board meeting on 12th November included a very constructive discussion led by Sussex Police, exploring how children excluded from school tend to become marginalised and vulnerable to criminal exploitation. This is naturally a key area of concern across the partnership.

Consideration of the support available to schools to prevent exclusions led in turn to an emphasis on how work to build parental capability can address the fundamentals of home life, so that children and young people come to school from a more stable, nurturing family environment, ready to learn and able to build a stronger, more coherent future for themselves. Safeguarding will always be the top priority within Social Care; but parent capacity for change is a cornerstone of the Family Safeguarding model of practice that we have explained to the Committee and propose to introduce in 2021. At the same time the ability of Health partners to support welfare at home and in school considerably underscores the combined impact of all the agencies. Our district council and voluntary sector colleagues can also play their part in delivering these outcomes.

This single example illustrates that the partnership has a developing sense of the potential for effecting positive change, based on the interplay of sometimes complex but generally interconnected social factors. I know that Lucy Butler is determined, as I am, to follow through to ensure that each partnership area is geared to maximise its collaboration, and very clear about the benefits accruing to public services of all kinds from closer co-operation. I will ensure that, through the Update report, the Committee continues to be briefed on partnership arrangements and initiatives, with an assessment of their impact.

3. The Committee requests further data and 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 is having on the service is included in the update report presented at the 7 January Committee meeting.

I am pleased with the service's response to the Pandemic and the Scrutiny Committee has received a detailed account of the methods being adopted for continuing to keep children safe, in contact and continuing their development during this period. One of the key principles of managing the service is that evidence-based decisions are informed by high-quality data. As you would expect, the Senior Leadership Team and service managers regularly review and respond as necessary to a range of key performance information. This discipline has been ever more important

during the Pandemic and has included a close scrutiny of the available staff resource in each part of the service, in relation to presenting demand.

In response to the Committee's request, the data and information sought on case levels in the different areas of the service since the start of the pandemic, along with how the service is dealing with this, is included within the Improvement Programme Update report provided as agenda item 5 for the 7 January CYPSSC meeting.

I hope this information meets your current need, and I would propose to provide a further 2020/21 year-end report at an appropriate meeting of the Committee next year, so that members can examine how the current issues have played out.

4. The Committee would welcome a view from the Corporate Parenting Panel on the quality of health support for children looked after.

In my role as Chair of the Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP), I am well aware of the important function that health support – both physical and mental - has on the wellbeing of the rising number of children who are looked after by this authority. Providing the right healthcare to children looked after requires good coordination between the County Council, the Clinical Commissioning Groups and the Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust, which provides the majority of interventions. Resources need to be scheduled in such a way that prompt referrals by social workers lead to timely Initial Health Assessments (IHAs, with a target of 20 working days after coming into care), and further interventions and reviews as needed.

At its meeting on 18th November, the CPP received the annual health reports from the Clinical Commissioning Groups and the Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust covering 2019/20. These drew attention to; better coordination between social work and health teams; there are signs that the voice of the child is being heard more; and attention has been paid to more timely assessments and following up the actions in individual health plans. However, Coronavirus and pressure on health service resources have inevitably made these improvements difficult to sustain during 2020, although children looked after received a priority status, and on-line assessments took over from face-to-face in many instances. In terms of Children's Services, performance on IHA referrals has fluctuated and still needs more work to be on target for all children looked after to have an IHA in the correct timescales.

My assessment of the current situation is that the picture is mixed. Our performance is not yet as good as I would wish it to be. However, all the partners have committed to working together to improve performance and I am determined to drive this agenda forward. Key priorities of the Health Subgroup (which reports to the CPP) are to improve our performance on Initial Health Assessments (IHAs) and provision for Mental Health issues and these feature prominently within its action plan.

I would welcome the opportunity to keep the Committee informed of progress in this crucial area, especially as the impacts of the Pandemic hopefully subside in the coming months.

5. Supports that co-production work with children and young people is carried out as part of the transformation agenda to ensure the voice of the child is at the centre of the development of the service.

The Committee's support is welcome as it echoes a strong theme in the new service outlook. This requires further development, but we have made considerable progress in our avowed principle of being child-focused and ensuring that their voice is not only heard, but that children and young people actually contribute to and influence the process of designing services for them.

As a recent example of this I would cite the active involvement of care leavers in the development of a new Care Leaver Offer, which we recently launched; their input has significantly enhanced its value. The last meeting of your Committee received a report on the use of technology (the Mind of My Own App) which encourages children to express their feelings in ways which help us to tailor our response more closely to their needs; we wish care practitioners to work in this spirit as a default approach. I look forward to being able to report further evidence of co-production and child-centredness as the improvement programme unfolds. I also welcome the increased presence of young people to provide feedback at meetings of the Scrutiny Committee, where that is appropriate.

In order to take this agenda forward in a more comprehensive way, we have commissioned an external provider, 'The Care Leaders Fellowship' to provide coaching and training to embed the views of young people into the work we do. In this way we will be able to give a clear demonstration of child-centredness across the service, and I look forward to giving the Committee an update next year on the progress of this initiative and its impact on children and young people.

6. The Committee requests that updates on staff engagement work are included in future update reports to the Committee

I know that Lucy Butler and her Senior Leadership Team are intent on establishing and maintaining a high-quality dialogue with staff; they recognise that this is an essential part of the improvement journey, and that genuine cultural change must support the professional and technical aspects of a service that aspires to be 'good'. As reported to your 24th September Committee meeting, a service vision and key supporting principles have been agreed and adopted as the bedrock of a culture that involves and respects all its members.

To introduce the principles of service improvement and redesign, a substantial Staff Engagement exercise was undertaken (July to October

2020), comprising 15 face-to-face events and 2 virtual sessions, welcoming over 450 staff from across the breadth of Children, Young People and Learning. At the same time, each part of the service was engaged in a discussion about 'what good looks like' and teams were invited to discuss and propose their own local view of this. A network of staff forums has been created, for Group Managers, Practice Managers and Social Workers, to ensure regular exchange of information and opinion. Lucy Butler sends staff a weekly message highlighting current matters, and this has been well received.

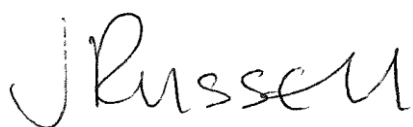
In addition to the above, a diagnostic survey was undertaken during the Summer which all staff were encouraged to participate in through filling in the questionnaire, an individual interview or attending a discussion group. This exercise was based on the principle that it is necessary to understand the past in order to inform the future. The findings were fed back to the Leadership Team and will help to inform the improvement programme.

It is pleasing to be able to report an excellent response to the extension of our retention offer for practising social workers: 96% of eligible staff have opted in for the retention take-up in December and we have seen a good level of early response for the next few months. It is extremely positive news that so many of our staff want to make this commitment to the organisation, and I am more than ever aware that this is because we all wish to see the same thing: the best outcomes for our children and young people.

I therefore believe that we are adopting a thorough and transparent approach to working with staff to establish a service of which we can all be proud. A new round of staff engagement will commence in December, to take forward the service redesign exercise that will run into the Spring. This will involve staff at all levels through regular updates and interactive discussion. I will ensure that your Committee is briefed on these discussions as we move forward and gains an understanding of the views of the workforce. I would like to assure the Scrutiny Committee that staff wellbeing through these difficult times is very close to my heart; I am confident that their strong commitment and appetite for change offers good prospects of better outcomes for children and young people in West Sussex.

I have deliberately elaborated my answers, in order to give the Committee a full picture and to stress the intensity of effort that is being applied to this great journey of improvement. I hope that I have addressed the questions you have raised, and I look forward to another fruitful meeting of the Scrutiny Committee in January.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Russett'. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Cllr Jacquie Russell

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People
West Sussex County Council