
West Sussex County Council's Children First Service Improvement Programme: Progress Report – February 2021

Introduction

- 1 I am providing a further update to all members to coincide with the County Council meeting on 12 February 2021.

Covid-19 Response

- 2 The service continues to work effectively with vulnerable children and their families during this third national lockdown. Throughout the pandemic, risk assessments have been carried out and RAG-ratings kept up to date for all cases. Our programme of visits to children has been carefully aligned to their level of vulnerability, with face-to-face visits as standard for children in need or on a child protection plan, and for initial assessments. School attendance for vulnerable children is being closely monitored. Volumes of casework – for instance in child protection – remain steady. Staff numbers continue to be stable and staff are well-provisioned with personal protective equipment (PPE). The mental as well as physical wellbeing of our workforce remains a key consideration for management and this has included delivering three on-line engagement sessions open to all staff, hosted by the Departmental Management Team during late January and February.

Staff Vaccination

- 3 It is very pleasing to report that, at the time of writing, vaccination appointments for all front-line children's services staff are being rolled out by the NHS. Our social workers and other care staff have demonstrated incredible commitment during the past months and I am pleased that they are now being prioritised for the vaccine.

Ofsted Monitoring Visit

- 4 Following the satisfactory outcome of the Ofsted Focused Visit in October 2020, a sequence of shorter Monitoring Visits will take effect. It is our intention that these will enable Ofsted and the Department for Education to validate our continuing service improvement and identify any areas where a greater focus is required. The first of these visits had been scheduled in the first week of March, but the current Covid-19 lockdown has caused this timetable to be changed and at the time of writing we are awaiting a replacement date from Ofsted. However, preparations for Ofsted and improvement activity continue at pace.

Partnership Working in Children's Services

- 5 I have sought in these updates to include a broad range of relevant topics and on this occasion, I thought it would be useful to remind members of one of the key elements in our improvement journey, namely the establishment and maintenance of strong partnerships. We now have very strong inter-agency arrangements in place to ensure that the work of all partners supporting vulnerable children and families is comprehensively coordinated and that there is a high standard of common working and shared expertise. 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 includes 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.

- 6 The other key partnership body is the **Safeguarding Children Partnership (SCP)**, which also has high-quality collaborative arrangements in place. The Partnership is now established and compliant with recent legislation intended to strengthen inter-agency working on safeguarding children. It makes a substantial contribution to achieving elements of the overall Children First Practice Improvement Plan. The SCP is led by three statutory agencies, the Police, the West Sussex Clinical Commissioning Group and the County Council. The Director of Children's Services is the delegated lead for this Council. The SCP has an Independent Chair and Scrutineer (Dr Chris Robson) who has statutory responsibilities within the legislation. It ensures that effective partnership arrangements are indeed in place and through testing and evaluation promotes high common standards of working and the sharing of best practice. The key practice priorities of the Partnership are Neglect, Child Exploitation, and effective Multi-Agency Safeguarding Practice.
- 7 The co-ordinated contributions of all partners are essential to our improvement journey, and I am both grateful to them, and committed to doing all I can to further strengthen the current arrangements.

Early Help Review

- 8 Following consideration by the Scrutiny Committee on 7 January and subject to Cabinet approval on 23 February, it is intended to launch a public consultation on the Early Help re-design proposal, which would commence in March and run for 10 weeks.
- 9 I fully recognise that this proposal is already creating a great deal of public interest and comment. While I acknowledge the part that children and family centres have played within their local communities in the past, I want to stress again that this proposal is concerned with creating a 'new kind of service', one that better addresses the needs of the most vulnerable in a Covid and post-Covid world and frees up more of our resources so that we can get closer to the customer. I hope that as many people as possible will examine our reasoning and engage in the debate and I would encourage all members to promote the consultation in their local areas. I also look forward to hearing further from partner organisations with ideas about the uses that can continue to be made of buildings in the County Council's control to support multi-agency outcomes for children and families.

Residential Services Update

- 10 The completion of construction of the three new residential homes remains on target for late March 2021, with registration and reopening expected to follow in April. The three open homes have continued to operate effectively despite the challenges of the pandemic, with all residential staff due to receive the vaccine promptly. We have continued with our residential review and the restructure of the service: this is also proceeding according to plan and we are currently recruiting for new residential service staff.

11 The work that the homes have been doing with children has been highly praised following two recent Ofsted assurance visits - one at Teasel Close in October 2020 and another at Orchard House in December. Ofsted have recognised how these homes promote 'the development of caring, warm and supportive relationships', respecting each child's unique needs. One child told the inspectors: "This home has changed my life" and "They have taught me to trust again". Despite the current constraints, the children in all homes have continued to achieve and to flourish, and it is a particular pleasure to receive testimony of this kind.

Single contact for concerns about children and young people

12 I would like to draw to all members' attention that there is now a single telephone number and email address for professionals and the public to report any kind of concern relating to children, as follows:

Telephone number: 01403 229900

Email address: WSChildrenservices@westsussex.gov.uk

13 This simplifies existing arrangements and will improve outcomes for vulnerable children, ensuring that their needs are reviewed and responded to quickly by a joined-up Early Help and Social Care team.

Conclusion

14 This month I have highlighted some key topics but as always, the full range of service improvement activity is continuing at pace. It is exciting to see the many different parts of a necessarily complex pattern coming together and increasingly gaining coherence. I remain very confident about the delivery of the overall improvement plan, and that it is a strong plan, which will give the best outcomes for our vulnerable children and young people.

With my best wishes for your continued good health.

For information

Jacquie Russell

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

Contact Officer: Lance John, Business Manager, 033 022 23456,
lance.john@westsussex.gov.uk

Statement from the Chair of West Sussex Youth Cabinet

February 2021

Whilst 2020 was the year of the 'unprecedented', the Youth Cabinet pushed through and laid the foundations for this new year, and for years to come. With three new campaigns, and our existing projects thriving – it's safe to say we're making progress here in West Sussex.

Our Mental Health campaign is on the planning path of a webinar that will educate young people on where to get help, why to seek help and opening up a conversation about mental health issues. We feel that mental health support needs to be readily available to all young people during a third lockdown. Watch out for more news on this soon! Similarly, our Political Engagement campaign is hosting some webinars in February covering political understanding, our political system and promoting discourse. These are running in conjunction with our ongoing podcast, which covers topical debates every week. Unfortunately, the Environment campaign is still limited in the practical campaigning they can do, beach cleans etc. However, we are working closely with the Marine Conservation Society and the Bees Conservation society to plan three workshops covering how we can protect the coast, where our products come from and how to reduce your carbon footprint. All of the above campaigns are present on our social media with various challenges and posts!

After Make Your Mark, we gained three campaign topics, and as a county came first in the country for voter participation. Going into 2021 we are now campaigning towards free university, homelessness, and supporting domestic violence victims - which was Rishi, one of the youth cabinet members proposals. We are currently exploring all of our options within these projects and the most effective ways to tackle them.

Our knife crime posters are going out to schools and youth facilities. This is a significant achievement for the youth cabinet, and we are confident they will work towards keeping young people safe in their communities.

We have continued our work with Sussex Police, Housing, Safeguarding the Children First Board and Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee and consultations, and are looking forward to the future of our roles within these meetings.

Above all, we have persevered in supporting young people and accentuating their voice during difficult times, and that is something we are immensely proud of.