

Report to Cabinet

27 July 2021

Early Help Redesign Proposals –Outcome from Children and Young People’ Services Scrutiny Committee

Report by Chairman of the Children and Young People’s Services Scrutiny Committee.

Electoral divisions: All

1. Background

- 1.1 On 7 January 2021 the Children and Young People’s Services Scrutiny Committee considered the aims and principles for a proposed redesign of the Early Help Service to provide an improved service to vulnerable children and families in West Sussex, and the plans to launch a public and stakeholder consultation on proposals for the future of the service.
- 1.2 The Committee broadly supported the need to investigate an improved and targeted early help offer and the launch of the public consultation. The Committee noted the potential impact of the proposals on the availability of universal services being provided from buildings from which the Early Help service could be withdrawn and asked that the impact and mitigation for this be addressed as part of the development of the proposals. The Committee raised a number of other issues which they would return to when the final proposals were presented for consideration.
- 1.3 Cabinet took a decision on 27 February 2021 to launch a 10 week public consultation to seek views from partners and residents on the proposals. The consultation ran from 8 March 2021 to 17 May 2021.
- 1.4 The Committee met on 20 July 2021 to consider the outcome and analysis of the public consultation and how this had informed the final proposals set out in the draft decision report which had been prepared for consideration by the Cabinet on 27 July 2021. The Committee focused on what the proposals were seeking to achieve in the context of the Council’s agreed priorities for residents and communities and how the proposals will deliver improved outcomes for vulnerable children and families.
- 1.5 The conclusions and a summary of the discussion of the Committee are presented here for consideration by Cabinet on 27 July 2021.

2. Conclusions of Scrutiny

2.1 The Committee:

1. Raised various concerns on the Early Help redesign proposals as set out in the summary of discussion set out below, but recognised the need of the County Council to drive forward the service's improvement journey and that the Early Help redesign proposals are considered to be a key part of that ambition.
2. Highlighted a particular concern over the ability to identify and address the needs of vulnerable children and families and that the Cabinet Member must be assured that there are sufficient resources to work with schools, other partners and early years settings to identify these at an early stage for the aims of the service to be realised.
3. Requests that there is constant, clear and detailed monitoring of the impact of the new proposals, including the identification of vulnerable children and families, and effective access to services, so that any unintended adverse consequences can be identified and addressed at an early stage and that there is evidence based assurance that the key outcomes of the service and its new model are being met.
4. Highlights the importance of a robust and wide reaching communications and engagement plan as part of the implementation of the proposals so that residents and partners know how and when to access services. The Committee requests that the proposed content of the communications plan is considered by Cabinet on 27 July and that members are engaged with its development so as to gain the necessary assurance for residents' ability to access the service.
5. Requests that it receives a report to review the impact of the new model after 12 months of implementation, which includes feedback from service users and partners and evidence on how it is delivering improved outcomes for vulnerable children and families.
6. Asks that the Cabinet Member for Finance and Property prioritises, as a matter of urgency, the work with partners and voluntary and community groups to explore opportunities to utilise the centres, or to find other solutions, where early help propose to withdraw, recognising the concern raised by residents on the potential reduction in access to universal services provided by those partners and other groups. The Committee also asks that there is member engagement in any future review of the relevant County Council assets and that this is considered by the appropriate scrutiny committee at the right time.
7. Thanks the public for their input, suggestions and views into the consultation and welcomes the level of engagement with young people to capture their views which have greatly helped the committee in its consideration of the proposals.

2.2 Councillors Cherry, Cornell, Mercer and Smith requested that the record show they did not support the conclusions set out above.

3. Summary of key points of discussion

3.1 Identifying those needing support

- Identifying vulnerable children and families is key to the success of the service. During the pandemic families were still successfully making contact with the service which was seen as a positive indicator but a sign of continuing and growing demand.
- A part of the proposals would be to enhance the contact with schools which was seen as a critical factor in ensuring the success of arrangements for identifying those children and families in need and who may not otherwise present themselves or be identified.
- Some members questioned how the new service proposals would be able to meet the increasing demand, and that it could result in further children and families requiring more intensive support. It was confirmed that, since the children and family centres closed in March 2020 contacts into early help had increased demonstrating that those requiring services had been able to reach them. There may still be hidden demand but the fact that services were contacted and accessed during such difficult times was seen as positive.

3.2 Access to Services and Communications Plan

- The Committee sought assurance that the plans for the location and operation of centres proposed to be retained would mean the service would still enable all residents across the County to have equal access to services. It was confirmed that three-quarters of work carried out by the service was already out in the community with staff visiting those in need rather than through buildings.
- The Committee noted that the communications plan had not been included with the papers before it and that it was important that this is robust and inclusive, including ensuring language was not a barrier, to ensure residents are aware of how they can access services in future – what is different and what it means for them.
- Some members raised concern that the proposals were not focusing sufficiently on prevention and therefore the new approach could run the risk of increasing the number of people requiring more intensive intervention from children's services. It was noted that this was a key aim of the redesign and so evidence of the planned impact on reducing more intensive intervention would be needed.

3.3 Post Implementation Monitoring

- The Committee recognised the significant changes the proposals represented and that the monitoring of outcomes, performance and residents' satisfaction on the new model would be paramount as the redesigned service is rolled out.
- The Committee highlighted the need for close monitoring of the performance of the new model and the importance of being flexible and able to address any areas of concern in service delivery as they arise and achievement against planned outcomes as performance measures are gathered. It was highlighted that there should be both short and long term targets which

should be constantly monitored and reviewed for assurance that the planned outcomes are being delivered.

3.4 Covid and Mental Health impact considerations

- The Committee recognised the increase of mental health issues for both children and families as a result of the effects of the continuing pandemic, and the importance of this being addressed within the redesigned service. It was recognised that mental health is an area of national concern that requires a multi-agency response and that whole family health assessments are undertaken by early help which would include mental health.

3.5 Government and Independent reports & Consultation Outcomes

- Highlighted the recent Ledsom Review and noted the need to be confident that the proposals are in line with the Review aims being put forward.
- Some members highlighted the proportion of consultation responses that were against the proposals and whether this should have led to a more thorough revision of the proposals. It was recognised that changes had been made to the proposals in light of the consultation outcomes including retaining an additional centre and maintaining the capacity for targeted support work as needs were identified.
- Questioned whether the Cabinet can be confident that the consultation has captured the views of all who would have wished to take part given it was carried out during the restrictions of the pandemic, particularly those in digital poverty.
- The level of engagement from young people in the consultation was welcomed, recognising this was an important voice to capture in the consultation process.

3.6 Partners' Impact and considerations

- Highlighted the importance of working with partners and voluntary and parent led groups where early help would be withdrawing from buildings. This included working with the Healthy Child Programme and midwifery to understand and support their needs moving forward.

3.7 Staff Considerations

- Asked what work would be done to keep redundancies to a minimum when moving to the new model.
- Were reassured that there are appropriate safe working practices already in place for early help staff visiting children and families in the community or at home.

3.8 Minority comments

- Councillors Cherry, Cornell, Mercer and Smith requested that their comments and suggestions which were presented to the committee by them be noted. These were not supported by the rest of the Committee:

1. That the Early Help redesign project implementation phase be suspended entirely for a minimum period of six months to allow:

- The project be bought back to CYPSSC for thorough review to identify significant gaps in the existing evidence and provide detailed recommendations on tests which should be met before full implementation can proceed.
 - A full pilot to be developed with a willing District, to provide robust evidence and data relating to the benefits, the risks, the impact and the measurable outcomes before any further move to County wide implementation.
 - A more thorough assessment be made of the overall picture from other authorities where such service changes have been implemented, to include the comparability of their starting position, their outcome measures, and their project timescale.
2. In spite of over three quarters of user respondents to the consultation strongly rejecting the re-design proposals, their views have been dismissed on the unsubstantiated premise that they did not understand the service they were using. In addition, some committee members felt the consultation to be flawed and that therefore the consultation must be re-designed and re run to ensure service users are fully engaged with and listened to, in line with this authority's stated objectives.

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