

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

12 January 2022

Children First Improvement - Children We Care for in West Sussex

Report by the Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning

Summary

This report sets out the activity and improvements that have taken place to services for Children we care for (children looked after by West Sussex County Council) since the Ofsted Judgement in May 2019. The report also provides details of evidence of where improvements have been made and a summary of plans to address identified areas for further improvement (Section 4).

The report covers the following areas (Section 2):

- Leadership and governance
- Corporate Parenting Panel
- Improving Permanence in outcomes for children
- Care Plans and Visits
- Health Assessments
- The needs of un-born children - Pre-Birth work
- The Fostering Service
- Life Story work
- Educational needs and attainment and role of Virtual School
- The County Council's Residential Services
- Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers (UASC)
- Voice and Participation of Children we Care for (Section 3)

The focus for Scrutiny

The Committee is invited to consider the improvement activity in services for Children we Care For as set out in the report and how these measures are providing better outcomes for those children.

Key areas for scrutiny include:

1. To consider the evidence and improvement activities outlined in Sections 2 and 3 of this report and whether this gives assurance that sufficient progress has been made to date to address the areas of improvement highlighted by Ofsted and the Commissioner.
2. To consider the plans for future improvement set out in Section 4 and whether these provide assurance that continued progress will be made to achieve a high-quality service for Children we Care for.
3. To consider what, if any, further assurance or reports the Committee requires to demonstrate that the journey of improvement remains on target.

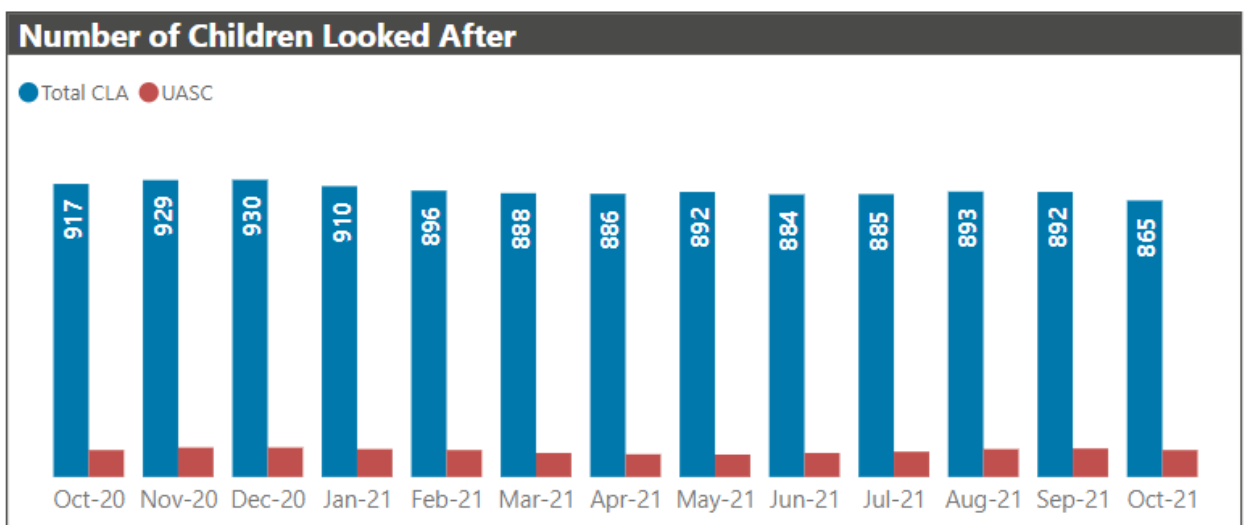
The Chairman will summarise the output of the debate for consideration by the Committee.

1. Background and Context

Introduction

- 1.1 This report will review the improvement in services to Children we Care for, also known as Looked After Children (LAC), since the Ofsted judgement of May 2019. Following a summary of Ofsted's initial findings, together with those of the Commissioner for Children's Services in West Sussex, the authority's response will be discussed. An evaluation of the current improved situation will be made, identifying areas of continued under-performance, where further focus is needed. This report is pertinent since Ofsted intends to base its next Monitoring Visit in March 2022 on Children in Care. The Committee will be aware that the service is on a journey of improvement from a very low base. This report provides evidence of how far the Council's services have improved to date, whilst not being complacent, and highlighting which areas require further improvement.
- 1.2 All members of the County Council hold a shared responsibility as corporate parents and receive training for this role as a compulsory part of their induction or continued training.
- 1.3 In terms of the national perspective, the 2021 review entitled 'Case for Change' took as its starting point that all local authorities with care responsibilities (together with their partners) should as a matter of course strive for the same qualities of care for their looked after cohort as any normal parent would naturally aspire to for their own children. The West Sussex Vision for children and young people echoes this approach and the improvement plans demonstrate a collective determination to meet this goal.

Trends in Children we Care for



- 1.4 The County Council currently cares for 865 children (October 2021), an increase of 30% since 2018. However, for many years the number of children cared for was below the national average per capita and

substantially below statistical neighbours. This was primarily due to the fact that West Sussex thresholds for care were too high and that children were being left in situations that were unsafe, as outlined in the Ofsted inspection in 2019. These issues have been addressed. Therefore, the increase in overall numbers since 2018 is in part a correction to bring West Sussex in line with comparable local authorities. The current trend, shown in the chart above is of stability in net numbers of children cared for, although within this there is regular movement into and out of care. The total is subject to marginal long-term reduction: this is due to the application of thresholds to prevent children being taken into care unnecessarily, where another safe option is available – such as the local authority making the necessary provision of accommodation without needing to take on parental responsibility.

Ofsted Inspection 2019

- 1.5 In its May 2019 report following the inspection in the previous February/ March, Ofsted found the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers to be inadequate. Too few children in care had an up-to-date, good-quality care plan and children were waiting too long for assessments of their health needs and for permanent homes. Delays in responding to cases of neglect led to children coming into care too late, by which time their needs had often become complex and challenging. Inspectors identified 'missed opportunities to improve children's lives and to achieve permanence in families when it is right for children'.

Permanence

- 1.6 The goal of all care responsibility is **permanence** - that is, that each child or young person should have a stable and supportive family home in which to grow to maturity - whether through a safe return to the birth family, living with other guardians or carers, through fostering or adoption, or through the authority's own residential care arrangements.
- 1.7 In 2019, Ofsted found an inconsistent approach to permanence planning in West Sussex, leading to a large number of children experiencing drift and delay, lacking stability and the opportunity to build their lives in a secure environment. Too many children were subject to temporary placements for too long, especially children with a disability, and with a lack of drive to turn temporary fostering arrangements into a secure adoption. Progress to adoption, where it occurred, was slow. Moreover, Life Story work – so crucial to a child's sense of their own identity - was delivered erratically, and children who had been adopted were not being regularly provided with Life Story books. Quality and timeliness of pre-birth placements for parent and child was also absent. Accordingly, Ofsted Recommendation 6 called for wholesale improvement in 'permanence planning for children, including the availability and use of foster-to-adopt placements, timeliness of assessments and planning for unborn babies'.

2. How the Service has responded

Leadership and Governance

- 2.1 Reports to this Committee covering different aspects of the service improvement agenda have repeatedly stressed the essential ingredient of

having a stable, high-quality leadership team in place, committed to driving the service forward to long-term goals and motivating the workforce to make this journey, with the requisite communication and support mechanisms in place. The Assistant Director for Corporate Parenting was therefore recruited into post on a permanent basis in October 2020 and has since confirmed his senior leadership team to drive the improvements within the service.

Corporate Parenting Panel

- 2.2 In 2019, Ofsted stated that the Corporate Parenting Panel was 'largely ineffective in delivering much-needed improvements', and with 'limited impact on making a demonstrable difference to services or outcomes for children in care'. The Commissioner for Children's Services subsequently recommended that it 'be reformed and redesigned in order that the voice of the child is heard by the organisation in an informed and constructive way'.
- 2.3 The re-founded Corporate Parenting Panel now has the appropriate high profile that it requires within the authority, and commands full Cabinet support. It is chaired by the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People. The arrangements have been substantially improved to include the attendance of children, and the creation of multi-agency subgroups, which also include the participation of young people. There is very high personal commitment and scrutiny by the Cabinet Member and other elected members regarding the progress of Children we Care for and care experienced children. Other notable improvements include the refresh of the Terms of Reference of the Panel in collaboration with young people themselves; continuing Corporate Parenting Training being made mandatory for all members; and a revision of the agendas to ensure they are young person focused.

Improving Permanence

- 2.4 The current focus on permanence identifies the service as one now basing all its priorities on delivering better outcomes for children and young people, rather than (as previously) being frequently preoccupied with process. To this end, a Permanence Oversight Board was created, including representatives from across service areas, to work on a joint Permanence Plan, raise the profile and understanding of permanence, and improve the pace and consistency of permanence outcomes. In terms of officer resource, a dedicated Permanence Team has been established around social workers with a special expertise in this area, to promote all aspects of permanence throughout the service, tracking delivery of outcomes and improving policies and procedures. This includes work to increase the pace of adoption, reduce the number of unlawful placements, and increase the regularity and quality of Life Story work (2.16 below).
- 2.5 A Permanence Panel has been in place since March 2020. This provides a structure to agree placements as permanent, to challenge and review where children are experiencing drift and delay, to support a return to the family home where this is feasible, and to ensure the best outcomes for siblings. This Panel has seen the number of children in permanent placement more than double to 245 in November 2021 from a base of 108 in February 2020; the number of permanence planning meetings held in 12 months has more than doubled, to 2,356. The Panel has received positive feedback after observation by partners from Hampshire County Council and been given

favourable notice by Ofsted inspectors. Permanence planning meetings now link in more constructively with legal processes, to ensure greater pace and consistency in delivering positive outcomes. Since April 2020 there has been close cooperation with Adoption South East, the Regional Adoption Agency, leading to an improvement in performance on adoption outcomes, in spite of significant court delays occasioned by Covid-19. The previous long waits for children to have a match have now become the exception rather than the rule. The key performance indicator entitled 'Permanence plans are in place for children looked after by the 2nd review, and timely' carries an expectation of 100%: it has shown sustained improvement from 89% in August 2020 to 98% currently (October 2021).

Care Plans and Visits

- 2.6 The service has a range of performance standards, which are closely monitored to reflect the critical need to ensure that Children we Care for have an up-to-date care plan that reflects their needs and wishes, and that they receive regular visits. The target for children to have a care plan in place and reviewed is 100%, and during 2021 relatively steady progress has been made towards this, with performance (October 2021) at 96%; (31 March 2021 87%). However, the percentage of statutory visits for Children Looked After in timescales is less strong, at 89% in October. This indicator benefited during the Covid-19 lockdown when national legislation permitted 'virtual' visits (video-call etc) to meet the statutory criteria, but these provisions expired in October 2021. Since then, performance has continued to be hampered by Covid-related factors, and it is estimated that 5% of visits in the last two months have had timescales disrupted in this way. However, some improvement is evident in November, when 93% of visits were on time.

Health Assessments

- 2.7 Ensuring that proper health provision is in place for all Children we Care for is a key area of continued focus. In its 2019 inspection, Ofsted found that 'of the children who started to be looked after during December 2018, only 13% had an initial health assessment completed on time. This means that children's health needs are not properly understood at the early stages of care planning'. It noted that there were also long waits for mental health support. The Initial Health Assessment (IHA) is one of the main indicators for children looked after by or through the authority. Historically, there was frequent delay in the IHA being completed to the required standard (within 20 working days of the child becoming looked after): this has remained an issue and is acknowledged to be an area of under-performance. Booking and securing actual attendance at a health appointment presents a challenge in that it requires careful coordination between the social worker, the NHS health practitioner and the child and their carer. Performance was inevitably impacted by the pandemic and monthly data has been very variable – during 2021 ranging between 20% and 59%.
- 2.8 Initial Health Assessments therefore present a continuing challenge across Children's Social Care and for Health partners. Covid-19 posed problems in accessing consent, and Health have experienced a shortage of practitioners. Health partners are currently working on a proposal to move to a single hub model whereby assessments will all take place in one location to maximise

availability and flexibility of practitioners, and to potentially co-locate some other services. Work within the service to address performance against timelines has focused on a daily dashboard which sets out which referrals are required and when they are due: this is updated on a daily basis and can be seen by all managers. The tool represents significant progress in managing the situation, since this information has not been readily available to staff in the past year. Regular coordination meetings are also now in place between the Children Looked After Nurses and administrative staff in both organisations.

- 2.9 Performance on the subsequent Review Health Assessments (RHA) has been stable and above national averages, at around 85%. The two main factors accounting for later assessments are: older children not wishing to consent to an assessment; and children placed out of county where there is complexity in getting assessments booked, since unique arrangements and communication are often needed.
- 2.10 Timeliness aside, the current position for children cared for over at least 12 months, is that 86% have an up-to-date health review and 70% have had a dental check: this represents an improvement on past performance, (for instance, at 31 March 2021 dental check compliance was at 52%) but more is needed to be done to meet a minimum standard of timeliness and quality. The results of the joint initiative described above between the service and its partners to address longstanding issues with IHAs, dental checks and screening for mental health issues will be reported to the Corporate Parenting Panel.

Pre-birth work

- 2.11 As noted above, Ofsted in 2019 criticised the quality of planning for unborn babies. The service has responded through a range of measures coordinated by a Pre-birth action plan, and a Pre-birth policy due for completion in January 2022. A stronger grip on pre-birth assessments is now achieved through tracking all cases, with advice and support being given to social workers on these cases. For parents with very young children, the service has made provision for targeted and focused work, to ensure that babies do not experience drift and delay in planning for their futures. There is a strong focus on scrutinising performance levels, with an increase in the proportion of pre-birth assessments (PBAs) completed in time, and improvements in areas such as the number of Foster for Adoption (FFA) placements being made. However, there is still much work to be completed around the consistent quality of assessments, pre-birth intervention, and timely birth-planning, as summarised in Section 4.

Fostering

- 2.12 A detailed report on Phase 2 of the Fostering Service Review will be brought to this Committee in March 2022. This section provides a brief summary of Fostering service developments within the broader context of corporate parenting. In spite of the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to recruit more foster carers generally, the summary picture of the service is positive. In terms of productivity, over the past year, 75% of foster carers were caring for a child for 75% of the year: this represents good utilisation of the foster carer resource and exceeds the national average of 69%

utilisation. The various feedback mechanisms in place show that there is a good relationship between social workers and foster carers, and in a recent survey, most foster carers scored the support they receive from their supervising social worker as 8/10 or above; the most common score was 10/10. Work continues to drive progress throughout the range of assessment activity underpinning service outcomes, and additional resource has been brought in to support work pressures, for instance with foster panels.

2.13 The increase in financial rates for foster carers with multiple children from April 2021 has brought West Sussex up to a competitive standard with neighbouring local authorities. While data is still being assembled, there is early evidence of a positive impact from the changes in terms of fostering enquiries and transferring foster carers, and an increase in the number of approved places per foster carer has been observed. Comparing April to October 2021 with April to October 2020:

- Visitors to the fostering website have increased by 76%
- Fostering enquiries have increased by 36%
- Generic fostering placement approvals have increased by 33%
- 26 new fostering assessments are underway - an increase of 47%
- Approvals for 2+ children have increased by 400%
- Around 60% of current applicants being assessed are in their 40s, which represents a younger cohort of foster carers coming into the service, and as such is a very welcome support to succession continuity.

Fostering for Adoption

2.14 Promoting arrangements whereby temporary fostering successfully converts to a child being adopted into a nurturing family is one of the best ways of achieving permanence for that child. As noted above, Ofsted in 2019 was critical of the authority's stance and performance in this area. To respond to this issue, the service is now working closely and proactively with Adoption South East and other partners and using the latest techniques to identify pre-birth and very young children who may be suitable for a foster to adopt solution. A promotional video is being prepared to highlight the approach to foster to adopt throughout the service. These measures help to remedy a previous situation where such opportunities were being missed.

2.15 In terms of outcomes, over the last 12 months there have been 15 children supported or placed in foster to adopt arrangements; 5 have subsequently gone on to be adopted; 4 have been placed in their adoptive families awaiting adoption hearings, and 4 placed awaiting matching panel; 2 children are awaiting placement orders before their matches can formally be progressed. There are also a further 10 children for whom fostering for adoption is being considered as a potential plan between now and February 2022.

Life Story Work

2.16 The objective of Life Story work is to provide a secure base for the cared for child to explore their past, present and future through creating a written record of their life events in a manner appropriate for them. Historically this activity did not feature significantly within West Sussex social work practice,

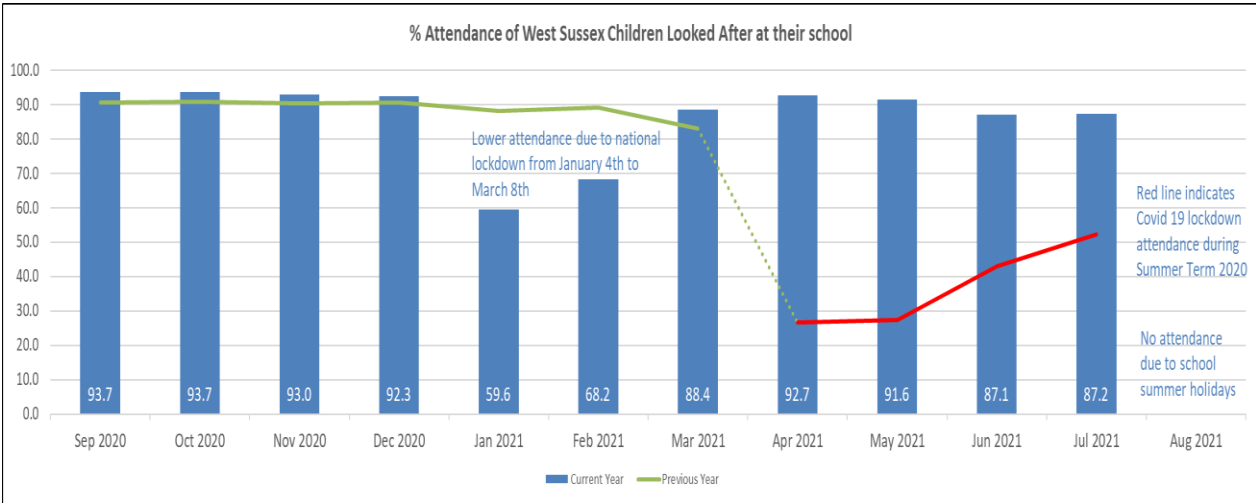
but major changes have now come into play. Children subject to adoption plans, long-term fostering, and Special Guardianship have life story books and later life letters. A range of tools and mechanisms has been developed for ensuring this material is captured consistently in the child’s record. This work when undertaken has been seen to aid children’s understanding of their circumstances and support their emotional wellbeing and permanence. The Life Story policy was being reviewed in December 2021 to ensure that best practice is pursued throughout the service. Feedback through recent audit activity and through the last applicable Ofsted Monitoring Visit in May 2021 has identified that Life Story work is increasingly present and beneficial to children, and that relationship-building with children is now a strong feature of casework.

Education and Virtual School

2.17 Ensuring that Children we Care for receive a high quality of education, equal to that enjoyed by their peers, provides a strong foundation for fulfilled lives. The Virtual School monitors the educational progress and attendance of all children looked after by the County Council. The Pupil Premium Plus grant (PPP) is allocated by the Department for Education to support its work. In 2019, Ofsted found that, due to issues of quality and delays in completing Personal Education Plans (PEPs), the Virtual School’s knowledge about and impact on the academic outcomes of children in care was limited. Persistent absence from school among this cohort was found to be high.

2.18 The Virtual School works with the wider professional network to ensure that all Children we Care for are in receipt of a high quality, appropriate education with most of the children attending schools graded good or better by Ofsted. Personal Education Plans have been redesigned to support children in their individual phase or circumstances and to focus attention on outcomes. During the academic year 2020/21, 95% of children had PEPs completed regularly and within timescales.

2.19 **School attendance** for all children has been impacted by the partial closure of schools during the pandemic. Attendance for the Children we Care for remained strong through the last academic year and the Virtual School ensured that all children who required in-person attendance were able to achieve it.



- 2.20 Due to the pandemic, measuring formal **academic achievement** in 2020/21 has been dependent on Centre Assessed Grades and there is no formal release of results for comparison. For all GCSE subjects, over 95% of Children we Care for achieved a graded pass and over 60% achieved a standard pass. Over a third achieved a strong pass in all GCSE subjects. In response to the Ofsted (2019) judgement, a robust system has been developed to look at the progress that children are making in the core subjects. This allows scrutiny of the impact of being in care, and the interventions of the Virtual School on the education of children. A full breakdown of the progress being made by the children will be evaluated by the Virtual School governing body.

Residential Services

- 2.21 The Residential service is recognised to be a high-performing part of Children's Social Care. Written and verbal feedback from children, parents, and partner agencies provides strong evidence that the work carried out by residential staff and management is highly rated. This is further demonstrated by reduced rates of children going missing, almost no restrictive physical interventions being necessary and a skilful response to presenting behaviours.
- 2.22 Over the past 18 months there have been no placement breakdowns, despite children coming from homes where other providers have failed to find the correct systems to engage them. There have been notable improved educational outcomes this year for all children in the homes, with a high level of children's participation and consultation. Across the past 12 months there have been almost no complaints across the service. An area for improvement concerns the need for more support from the Children & Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS – NHS) to meet the complex needs and vulnerabilities of some of the residents. Improved liaison with Disability services is also required.
- 2.23 Stable and strong practice in the three homes is well evidenced within the full Ofsted regulatory inspection reports, with each being rated as 'Outstanding'. There have been 3 full inspection visits carried out by Ofsted this year, which have confirmed the ratings and praised the staff teams' work with children and the successful outcomes achieved within the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic. The establishments benefit from good workforce retention rates, indicating a stable staff team.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

- 2.24 The Children's Asylum team provides specialist support to safeguard and promote the welfare of unaccompanied minors arriving from abroad. The Committee was provided with a briefing report last month and will be aware that this is a complex cohort of children with varying legal rights to receive support, who due to their lived experiences are highly vulnerable. The complexity of their needs is exacerbated by cultural and language differences. Under the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) rota, West Sussex has committed to take children seeking asylum from other local authorities where they are supporting disproportionate numbers of children and young people due to their locations near ports of entry. After Kent and Portsmouth,

West Sussex is the next highest provider as a local authority for children seeking asylum within the region. There are currently 90 children open to the team (November 2021): this number is expected to rise, leading to the prospect of future resource pressure.

- 2.25 The National Transfer Scheme Rota mandate for Children Seeking Asylum comes into effect as of January 2022, however, WSCC have started engaging with the process as of the beginning of December 2021 and have already accepted 3 children via the scheme.

3. Voice and Participation

- 3.1 This section adds further detail to the information provided in the report to the last meeting of the Committee on 1 December 2021. In order to place Children we Care for at the centre of all undertakings, the service must engage with them to understand their needs and wishes, and in the broadest sense to regard them as partners in designing and delivering the services they receive, through a genuinely participatory relationship. The language used in meetings, letters, Life Story work and other records should not only be age-appropriate but should reflect an empathic approach to corporate parenting. This approach is one that is being led and modelled by managers throughout the service, and tangible signs of a cultural change are becoming evident. Additionally, the service is working with the Care Leaders Fellowship, a company specialising in young people's participation in the care sector. Examples of ways that engagement with cared for children is occurring are given below, together with the impact that this is having.
- 3.2 **Mind of My Own**, the digital app for young people to communicate with social care practitioners has experienced strong growth in use since its introduction in 2016. In 2018 it was used 127 times; 2019 417; 2020 677; and 395 times in the first six months of 2021. There is evidence of its enhanced value to young people especially during Covid-19 lockdown. Case studies have demonstrated its impact, for example in raising formal complaints, and making changes in supervised contact arrangements. Feedback is regularly taken from young people and workers on its usage to support further improvements.
- 3.3 **Children in Care Council (CiCC)**, the forum for 10–16-year-olds in care to express their views about the services that affect them, has been undertaking a range of activity, including the following:
- 'Participation Pack' allowing young people to consider content of meetings a week before attending: has led to greater engagement and outcomes.
 - CiCC completed the final version of 'New into Care Pack' written from a young person's perspective.
 - There are strong linkages with the Corporate Parenting Panel and other boards, where cared for children speak and have their voices heard. A CPP Young People's Panel has been created, allowing young people in care to contribute directly to the work of the CPP; speaking at and co-chairing meetings are now becoming normalised.

- Included in the CiCC workplan is the 'Treat Us the Same' campaign to reduce stigma for young people in care: this has led to a reduction in children taken out of classes, from over 400 per month, to only 12. Other workplan activity includes 'Involve me in decisions made about me' and 'Language used about young people in care'.
- Working to improve services: for instance, reviewing tools and resources, adding young people's voice to the new Social Work Practice Standards, and developing resources used by the Missing Children service.

3.4 **EPIC (Exceptional People in Care) Awards, 7 November 2021:** This year's event to recognise the achievements of Children we Care for and care experienced children led to 330 individuals being nominated from different services and organisations throughout West Sussex, with 500 people attending the event in person. This is believed to be the largest achievement event for CLA/Care Leavers in the UK, attracting significant press coverage in West Sussex.

3.5 **Bright Spots** is a charitable sector initiative to support local authorities to systematically listen to their children in care and care leavers about the things that are important to them. The County Council is participating in a national survey to gauge subjective wellbeing of young people in care aged 4-18: this will lead to an action plan led by young people and will influence the local service plan, with impact on practice improvement anticipated.

4. **Current assessment and continuing priorities**

This section summarises progress to date and future improvement plans with Children we Care for.

Outcomes of recent Ofsted Monitoring Visits

4.1 In May 2021, an Ofsted Monitoring Visit focused on Permanence planning, Life Story work and Management oversight and identified 'steady progress'. The main findings were:

- Children and young people were thriving in their permanent families and their needs were being met.
- The decision-making and planning for finding children and young people long-lasting homes was well-considered.
- There was thoughtful and creative practice from staff, especially around Life Story work, helping children to understand what has happened in their lives.
- While processes and quality assurance had been strengthened, there was the need for more consistency around the impact of the work taking place.
- Compliance with audit completion had significantly increased.

- Management oversight was improving but there was more to do to ensure consistency in the quality and impact of assessments and plans for children and young people.

4.2 These May 2021 results were encouraging, but inspectors were clear at that time that in general there was still too much inconsistency of practice to give assured outcomes for children and young people. The subsequent Monitoring Visit in September 2021 was specifically focused on Children with Disabilities, but the inspectors commented that 'A stable senior leadership team is resolute in its approach to achieving sustainable improvements for the children of West Sussex'. It follows that the forthcoming Monitoring Visit in March 2022, scheduled to focus on Children in Care, will represent an extremely important milestone assessment of the progress being made against the topic areas covered in this report.

Priorities and Planned work for the next year

4.3 Across the next 12 months key areas of improvement will be:

- Complete the **Fostering Service Review**: a report on this topic is expected to be brought to this Committee at its March 2022 meeting. Ensure that the benefits of the Review are felt in terms of improved permanence outcomes for children and young people.
- Further improvements to **Permanence Planning** – including ensuring that every child is the subject of a clear and SMART plan regarding their permanence, with a renewed focus on older children and the potential for restorative work with their families, and to ensure there is rigorous oversight that the right children are taken into care.
- **Entry to Care**: Redouble efforts to deliver safe systems to ensure that only those children enter care for whom this is the right option: this will include an Entry to Care Panel to ensure senior management oversight of all children proposed to become looked after by the authority, including accommodation and placement suitability.
- **Pre-birth work**: Make further improvements to the timeliness and quality of pre-birth assessments, including raising the profile of pre-birth work and providing further training for social workers. Improving the use of legal procedures in respect of care proceedings and working smarter to minimise unnecessary process.
- **Performance**: Make further improvements in those areas where key performance indicators (KPIs) are currently unsatisfactory – especially in regard to Health Assessments and outcomes (as discussed at paras 2.6-2.10 above), and working effectively with partners to this end.
- Manage the resources necessary to meet the anticipated increase in demand in services to **Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers** (UASC) and to meet the requirements under the National Transfer Scheme rota commitments (para 2.24 above refers).

- Monitor and maintain the overarching focus on permanence for all children and young people in the authority’s care, and to ensure that permanence action planning in the best interests of children is effective.

5. Resources

- 5.1 The Council has provided the required and appropriate resources through the budget setting process for this part of the service.

6. Issues for consideration by the Scrutiny Committee

- 6.1 The Committee is invited to note the wide range of improvement activity in services for Children we Care for, summarised in this report, and to endorse that this is sufficient and satisfactory in the context of delivering the Children First Improvement agenda up to the current time. The Committee is also invited to consider the plans for further improvements in services to Children we Care for, and to consider what, if any, further information is needed to provide assurance that the journey of improvement remains on target.

7. Consultation

- 7.1 Not applicable – this is a report for information

8. Risk Implications and Mitigations

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
The risk that the service has not made sufficient progress to satisfy the expectations of Ofsted inspectors at the Monitoring Visit in March 2022	Ofsted has consistently agreed that management has a sound and realistic understanding of the position of the service, and inspectors have recognised the upward trajectory of improvement to date. It is natural, with the passage of time, that expectations of delivering a quality service should increase. The improvements set out in this report, together with the plans to address acknowledged deficiencies, are considered to place the service in an appropriate position for this phase of the improvement journey.
Risks to the stability of children and young people in the care of the local authority arising from the current change processes and/or external restrictions (e.g. Covid-19).	Evidence from Ofsted commentary, from the Commissioner for Children’s Services, from the partner in practice, and from internal audit work, together with greatly improved engagement with the customers of the service, suggests that the experiences of Children we Care for in West Sussex are becoming increasingly stable and that the children are benefiting from the improvements already in place. The service has handled the Covid-19 restrictions well, and can be expected to continue to do so.

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 and young persons in its area, 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. The Council will continue to ensure it fulfils all its statutory duties regarding meeting the needs of children and young persons in its area during the Children First service transformation programme.

Lucy Butler,

Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning

Contact:

Daniel Ruaux, Assistant Director - Corporate Parenting

Appendix 1 – Performance Summary Report (November 2021)

Background Papers - None