

## **Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee**

**8 June 2022**

### **Regulatory Scrutiny of Children's Services and Children's Workforce Development**

#### **Report by the Director of Children, Young People and Learning**

#### **Summary**

To assist the Committee in its role of scrutinising the Children First Improvement Programme, this report provides an update on service developments since its last meeting on 9 March 2022. The report sets out the following:

- a) The latest position regarding external regulatory scrutiny of the service, including the Department for Education (DfE)'s decision to withdraw the instruction to form a Children's Trust, and the results of the recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit (Section 2).
- b) As requested by the Committee at its last meeting, information is provided on current staffing levels in the service (Section 3).
- c) The progress towards the Family Safeguarding model of social work, the single integrated information system, and the Residential Improvement programme (Section 4).
- d) The Appendix contains the latest available performance summary, to 30 April 2022.

#### **The focus for scrutiny**

The Committee is asked to scrutinise the outcomes of the recent regulatory scrutiny of the service, the current workforce position and recruitment and retention initiatives, and to assess how these are evidencing and helping to achieve better outcomes for children and families in line with the Council Priorities and Children First Improvement Programme.

Areas for scrutiny include (key lines of enquiry):

- The areas for improvement identified by Ofsted or the Commissioner in their recent reports (Section 2 of the report) and how these are being addressed.
- That the initiatives in place for recruitment and retention (Section 3) are deliverable and that there is a clear timeframe for this.
- The latest performance data (Appendix 1), and to highlight any areas for consideration or action by the Cabinet Member.

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

## **Introduction**

### **1. Background and Context**

- 1.1 This report is part of a series that provides the Committee with a regular update on plans and actions from the Children First improvement and service transformation programme. It summarises recent developments and activities within regulatory scrutiny, service delivery, transformation and redesign processes and includes areas where the Committee has previously requested information. Any further updates will be provided verbally at the meeting.

### **2. Regulatory Scrutiny**

#### **Children's Trust**

- 2.1 The Secretary of State for Education, through the Department for Education (DfE) has overall authority for making directions for the delivery of local authority services for children, where an authority is judged to be inadequate by Ofsted at inspection. Following the 2019 inspection a further report was made by the Commissioner, John Coughlan in November 2019, which resulted in the DfE requiring the Council to prepare to relinquish its Children's Services to an independent Trust. However, following rapid improvement and on the further advice of John Coughlan, this process was paused during 2021. This recognised the improvements in corporate governance and service delivery that the Commissioner had already identified. At the beginning of 2022, the Commissioner made a further submission to the DfE, with his revised recommendation for the future governance of West Sussex Children's Services. This was supported by a dossier of evidence provided by the service and presented to the Commissioner and the DfE in December 2021. The evidence base demonstrated significant and consistent improvement across all the Commissioner's published measures of assessment.
- 2.2 Responding to these findings on 31 March 2022, the DfE issued a new statutory direction stating that Children's Services should remain within West Sussex County Council control pending a future full reinspection by Ofsted. This decision to allow the Council to retain autonomous control of its Children's Services is based on continuing external scrutiny by the Commissioner, by Ofsted through its sequence of Monitoring Visits, and through Hampshire County Council, the partner in practice. It is believed to be the first occasion on which the DfE has rescinded such a statutory direction and demonstrates the exceptional nature of the progress made by West Sussex Children's Services over the past three years. The information related to this decision is available [here](#) and John Coughlan's report to the DfE is available on this [link](#).
- 2.3 This unprecedented success should be regarded as a significant milestone upon the journey of service improvement and a cause for deep satisfaction throughout this authority and its partners. Notwithstanding this, Children's Services remains a work in progress: much is left to be achieved in order to deliver the right level of care consistently for vulnerable children and families in West Sussex. Retaining autonomy allows service leaders to continue the programme of reform with renewed vigour and without the distraction and

administrative cost that a Trust would have represented. There is however, no room for complacency. To consider the latest independent view of the state of the service, this report will consider the results of the recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit.

### **Role of the Commissioner for Children's Services**

- 2.4 With the change in the statutory direction, John Coughlan's role as the Commissioner will come to an end and he will now take on the role as Independent Chair of the Improvement Board.

### **Ofsted Monitoring Visit, March 2022**

- 2.5 As part of its oversight of the improvement programme, Ofsted instituted a regular cycle of Monitoring Visits, which took place in May and September 2021, and then most recently on 30-31 March 2022. In March 2022, Inspectors visited the service in person and reviewed the progress made in the following areas of previous concern:

- The quality and effectiveness of assessments, care planning and the support provided to children and young people in care.
- The quality, timeliness and impact of supervision, management oversight and decision making, social work capacity and caseloads.

The letter summarising the findings of the Visit was published on 9 May 2022, and the details can be viewed [here](#).

### **Findings of the March 2022 Monitoring Visit**

- 2.6 The reported outcomes of this visit are generally favourable: they confirm the continued positive trajectory of change, and provide further vindication of the DfE decision discussed above. Ofsted's key observations can be summarised as follows:

- Inspectors have restated their previous view that senior management has a good grasp of where the service is on the journey of improvement and what further work is required. Ofsted noted the internal problem-solving events that the service is putting in place to address areas of focus.
- The quality of social work practice and the experiences of the children in the care of West Sussex have significantly improved since the May 2019 inspection. Inspectors have recognised the political and corporate support, including considerable financial investment, that has helped to bring this situation about.
- Most children are now living in arrangements that meet their needs and in settled long-term homes. Their circumstances have improved, and many are doing well. Investment in additional fostering capacity and in children's residential homes is acknowledged. A small number of young people are living in unregulated arrangements that do not yet meet their current care and support needs, or with family and friends carers in unapproved settings: these are current areas of focus for improvement.

- A reconstituted and strengthened corporate parenting board readily hears and responds to children's voices. Generally speaking, engagement and participation of children and young people throughout the service is much improved.
- Comprehensive performance reporting and oversight has ensured that many important performance measures such as timeliness of visits to children and reviews of their arrangements have significantly improved and this trend is being sustained. The timeliness of Initial Health Assessments and the completion of Strengths and Difficulties questionnaires (mental health assessments) however remain an area of focus for improvement.
- Most children are seen regularly by their social worker; engagement is generally respectful and effective, and appreciated by the child. Children can express their wishes and feelings; their experiences are understood and they have a clear sense of the reasons for decisions made on their behalf. Some children still experience too many changes of social worker, although this situation is improving. The quality of contact with birth families and children's Life Story work has improved.
- The education needs of cared-for children are better provided for, supported by improved partnership working, and the Virtual School is having a beneficial impact.
- The necessary service redesign work now in progress has been recognised to have produced some turbulence in service delivery, but inspectors were satisfied that this was a temporary effect that would be stabilized.
- The Ofsted findings concluded with the observation that 'Inspectors observed a growing sense of optimism, enthusiasm and belief within the workforce. Leaders and managers are visible. Practitioners are excited and enthusiastic for the implementation of the new practice model'.

### **Commentary and key areas for improvement**

2.7 Ofsted has quite rightly laid equal stress upon those aspects of the service that have not yet reached a satisfactory level, and these are noted above. However, all are clearly identified in senior management's self-assessment of the service, and plans are in place to address them. In terms of measures to raise standards across the service in the coming period, the Practice Improvement Plan sets out three key objectives:

- **Practice Improvement:** achieve a 'good' level of practice by the end of 2022/23.
- **Leadership:** develop effective professional leadership and management capability throughout the service.
- **Partnerships:** achieve effective partnership working, delivery and strategic planning.

Future plans receive further coverage in the following agenda item (Governance and Forward Planning Arrangements in Children's Services), which should be considered in conjunction with this report.

### **The progress to full Inspection in 2023**

- 2.8 Ofsted has indicated that it wishes to conduct a further Monitoring Visit within the current cycle, indicatively in September 2022. This will focus on children in need or on child protection plans, and who require help and protection. This visit will complete a process in place since the judgement of May 2019. A full Inspection of the service is then expected, probably in the early part of 2023. The senior leadership team has prepared for this by maintaining close scrutiny and oversight on all aspects of service delivery and improvement activity. Regular reports and evidence gathering are submitted to the Directorate Leadership Meetings and dedicated Ofsted Preparation Meetings which enhance the regular performance and quality assurance activity that is now embedded within the Department.

### **Youth Justice Inspection, March 2022**

- 2.9 As previously reported, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, the regulatory body for this service conducted an inspection of the Youth Justice Service from 14-18 March 2022. This County Council service sits within Children's Social Care. The Youth Justice Service works closely with partners, including the courts, police, schools, colleges, district and borough councils and the voluntary sector to prevent youth offending and reduce reoffending by children in West Sussex. The inspection afforded a welcome opportunity for the service to showcase the preventative work it is doing to minimise the number of children entering the criminal justice system and to promote their best outcomes in terms of safety, education and wellbeing.
- 2.10 The Inspectors' report will not be published until 21 June 2022. However, indicatively the feedback demonstrated that the service gave a good account of itself and that the inspectors were impressed by the quality of staff commitment and the work being done with young offenders, within the context of a strong partnership framework. The full report will be shared with members when published.

## **3. Workforce Development**

### **Introduction**

- 3.1 The Committee received a detailed Workforce report on 29 September 2021, to coincide with the introduction of the Social Work Offer. Subsequently, at the meeting on 9 March 2022, members requested a further update on staffing levels. As previously reported, the service has given priority to creating the environment to nurture a stable, well-organised, well-supported and competitively remunerated workforce that is highly motivated and equipped with modern techniques. Putting these provisions in place has supported the service's aspirations for the recruitment and retention of staff, including keeping the caseloads of social workers at a reasonable level. At the Ofsted Monitoring Visit in March 2022, inspectors commented favourably that a multi-faceted approach to recruitment and retention is beginning to increase permanence and stability within the workforce. They noted that there is a tangible, positive shift in culture within the organisation and that the vast majority of practitioners they spoke to report their workload to be manageable.

## **Current Staffing Levels**

- 3.2 The following workforce data is as recorded on 3 May 2022, expressed as full-time equivalent (FTE) posts, and relates to the social worker establishment of 511 FTE across the county. Of this total, there are 449 posts (88%) permanently filled, giving a permanent staff vacancy gap of 62, or 12%. However, there are also full-time absences of 46 FTE (9%): these are due to a combination of maternity leave, long-term sickness, secondments and career breaks. To address the shortfall within the service there are currently around 78 agency staff (15%). This leaves a net 'uncovered vacancy gap' of around 30 FTE or 6%. The equivalent figure 12 months ago was around 5%, but at that time staff were held in post through a retention package which was discontinued in July 2021. The general picture within the data is of having maintained stability through a difficult time of transition. The following paragraphs set out the work now planned and underway to assist in reducing the vacancy gap during the year.

## **Meeting the challenges of demand and supply**

- 3.3 Social workers, both permanent and agency, are a scarce commodity nationwide: recruitment and retention presents a challenge to all local authorities, both now and into the future. At the same time, demand pressure for social care services has been severely exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, children's emotional wellbeing issues and the rising cost of living. The service has three complementary strategies to respond to the recruitment issue:
- reducing overall demand, which as previously reported is a stated goal of the Family Safeguarding Model (FSM) but cannot start to be realised until the model has gained traction within the service and with service users, with all of its components fully staffed.
  - finding ways to make professional staff more efficient – for instance, where appropriate by divesting them of purely administrative tasks, or providing improved IT solutions that help to maximise their time spent with children and families.
  - growing new staffing capability through promoting entry schemes such as the in-house Social Work Academy and apprenticeships.

All three of these approaches keep the child and family at the centre of the undertaking and each is currently being pursued within the development programme of the service.

## **Growing social work staff in-house**

- 3.4 Ofsted has commented appreciatively on the innovative measures being taken, alongside the Social Work Offer, to recruit and develop a high-quality intake into the professional practitioner cohort. The headlines for this work are as follows:

- The first group of 7 social work Apprentices will complete their 3-year training in Summer 2022 and will become newly-qualified social workers (NQSWs) from September 2022.
- 60 applicants have been shortlisted for interview for the September 2022 intake to the NQSW Social Work Academy scheme: taking on even a proportion of these will have a significant positive impact on reducing the vacancy gap.

The interest generated by these schemes and the wish of motivated entrants to consider a career with West Sussex, is very reassuring. Although this has the potential to ease vacancy pressure, it should be noted that practitioners from this input will not have the capability to take on a full social work caseload during their first year in practice: it will be necessary to retain experienced Agency staff in post for the time being in order to allow new entrants to develop their skills and confidence in a secure environment. However, this represents a sound investment in the workforce for the medium- to long-term and makes a major contribution to the management of future risk. The outcomes of this activity will be reported to a later meeting of the Committee when the picture will have become clearer.

### **Other recruitment issues**

3.5 Outside of the above data, bespoke, focused recruitment activity is continuing to meet identified staffing shortfalls, especially in Early Help (experiencing shortfalls mainly in the north of the county); and the Residential Service (needing further recruitment to staff up the newly-opened children's homes). The key activities are:

- 'Meet the Team' events, which are extensively advertised through social media. These take an innovative, economical approach, using informal guided conversations to give potential applicants an insight into the roles being offered, and enabling the service to rapidly assess experience and suitability before a confirmatory application is made.
- A cross-directorate problem-solving event on recruitment and retention was held on 13 May 2022, supported by Human Resources, so that a wide service representation could discuss issues, share ideas and identify the best approaches.
- Consideration is being given to the further potential for the recruitment of professionals from abroad.

### **Staff Survey 2022**

3.6 A new staff survey dedicated to the Children's workforce was run during February-March 2022, which was completed by 411 staff members. This section summarises the results, comparing them with a similar survey that took place in May 2021 (in connection with the Covid-19 recovery strategy) and was reported to this Committee on 29 September 2021. The 2021 survey received 521 responses, so 2022 shows a fall of 21%. Whilst staff are not mandated to complete the survey, senior management wishes to ensure the response is as broad as possible and therefore plans are in place to

encourage greater participation in the next survey. This will include placing stronger emphasis on managers promoting the survey within their teams, and allocating individuals dedicated time to complete it. Some headline comparator results can be summarised as follows:

<b>Factor</b>	<b>2022 %</b>	2021 %
Staff feel well informed about the service	<b>71</b>	76
Staff agree there has been a positive change in culture in the last year	<b>61</b>	51
Internal communication has improved	<b>69</b>	75
Lucy Butler’s weekly staff communication is helpful	<b>84</b>	86
Morale is rated as satisfactory or better	<b>70</b>	75

3.7 Additionally (for questions asked only in 2022), 95% of respondents confirmed that they have a monthly one-to-one meeting with their manager; 91% agreed that their manager provides the necessary help and support for them to do their job as effectively as possible; however, only 68% agreed that they feel physically and emotionally strong and resilient. A free-text question invited respondents to identify what they enjoyed about working in Children, Young People & Learning; 317 responses were received and the key themes were as follows:

- The difference made to the lives of children and families
- Working as part of a strong / dedicated / supportive team
- Working directly with children, young people and families
- The people I work with
- Working in partnership and with other teams
- Feeling like I make a difference to children and families
- Varied nature of the role
- “I love my job”

### **Commentary on the Survey results**

3.8 These results show that the levels achieved in 2021 have dipped slightly, but have broadly been maintained, notwithstanding that they arise from a period of considerable turbulence: the continued effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the service reorganisation (in the case of Education & Skills, still in progress), combined with the challenges of assimilating new techniques and training, frequent Ofsted visits, and (until the recent announcement about the withdrawal of a Children’s Trust) uncertainty about the strategic future of the service, have all necessarily impacted on how staff feel about their roles. The strength and resilience of all staff teams is critical to enable them to effectively manage their role and support children and families effectively. The fact that 32% of respondents did not confirm that they felt physically and mentally strong and resilient is a cause for concern and a focus for further management attention. The following plans have been agreed:

- Further analysis of attitudes and issues within particular parts of the service, with directors and heads of service areas undertaking localised interventions as appropriate.

- Open conversations will be encouraged between managers and staff. A focus will be given to physical and emotional wellbeing at the Staff Conference in October 2022.
- The positive comments made through the staff survey (3.7 above) will be used in recruitment and retention-focused work.

There is an expectation that the stability now being achieved within the service will promote improved feelings of wellbeing; this supposition will continue to be tested through the regular face-to-face and on-line engagement that the Senior Leadership Team has with staff, and through the next staff survey, intended to be run in Spring 2023.

#### **4. Other Service Updates**

##### **Family Safeguarding Model**

- 4.1 The implementation of the Family Safeguarding Model (Phase 1 - children's social workers), previously reported to the Committee and commencing in February 2022, is proceeding according to plan. The staffing structure, comprising Assessment and Family Safeguarding teams across the western, central and eastern areas are fully operational. The next phase of the programme is progressively to introduce the adult service components of the model. It is expected that the Domestic Violence workers who are already Council staff will join in June 2022. Mental Health and Substance Misuse specialists will follow during the Autumn through arrangements being entered into with Health partners. Having holistic services to children and parents within integrated intervention teams will significantly improve effectiveness, in terms both of increasing family resilience and the avoidance of demand and costs.

##### **Information Systems: towards transformation**

- 4.2 As previously reported, the need for a comprehensive information system across the Children, Young People and Learning Directorate is an integral part of achieving a modern, partnership-based service. It has been noted that the service is hampered by having 11 separate systems where information about children is recorded, from a total of 6 different suppliers. Following an evaluation process, the contract has been awarded to Access UK Limited (formerly Servelec Education Ltd) to provide a solution to consolidate and integrate systems used to record information about children and their families across Children, Young People and Learning.
- 4.3 The contract commenced on 1 April 2022 for an initial period of 2 years, with an option to extend by up to 2 years. The implementation project will involve significant resource from across the Council for a period of 18 months. This will include business input, IT resource, training costs and project management. Rationalising data systems in this way will offer a major benefit to children, young people and families across the whole Children, Young People and Learning Directorate, in terms of the better coordination of evidence-based services delivered to them.

## **Residential Improvement Update**

4.4 The Residential Service continues to go from strength to strength. Four out of six of the homes are now rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted; the fifth is 'good' in all areas at the point of its first inspection, and the sixth is awaiting its first inspection; (N.B. this last home, Blue Cove remains closed due to staffing issues – see below). The programme of capital works to further improve the homes is continuing, as follows:

- **Phase 1:** All construction work is complete. Bright Star and Breakwater opened in 2021. Blue Cove remains closed due to the recruitment challenges being experienced nationally in this sector, and the service is exploring all avenues to fill vacancies.
- **Phase 2:** Design work for the remaining homes has now largely completed, and the procurement of contractors will soon commence. High-level and indicative completion dates are:
  - Brick Kiln – 2023 (this is a property currently held by the service, for which Ofsted registration will be applied for and staff recruited, to become a new home within the Residential Service)
  - 40 Teasel Close – Early 2024 (this property will provide temporary accommodation for the children from High Trees and 18 Teasel Close during works to their homes)
  - Orchard House Children's Home – end of 2023
  - High Trees Children's Home – end of 2024
  - 18 Teasel Close Children's Home – mid 2025
- **Phase 3:** Scoping work is currently underway to develop plans to further expand the service to meet demand.

## **5. Resources**

5.1 Costs for the activities described in this report, including those for the commissioning of a new information system, remain within the approved budget envelope. The Committee is aware that the aspiration towards family stability and a reduction in the number of children taken into care are expected to assist the County Council to manage the costs of Children's Social Care more effectively into the future.

## **Factors taken into account**

## **6. Issues for consideration by the Scrutiny Committee**

6.1 The Committee is invited to note the progress outlined within this report and confirm that it is satisfied with the pace and quality of the improvement activity across the Children, Young People & Learning Directorate.

## **7. Consultation**

7.1 Not applicable – this is a report for information.

## 8. Risk Implications and Mitigations

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigating Action (in place or planned)</b>
Risks to the ability to sustain the progress made to date	The service has demonstrated improvement in all the areas originally identified by Ofsted and the Commissioner, and this has been formally acknowledged. Service management, human resources, professional practice, infrastructure and culture are being transformed in a manner that is expected to be fully sustainable. The County Council has continued to ensure that the improvement programme is adequately resourced. This approach is supported by initiatives such as the Family Safeguarding Model and the introduction of comprehensive and integrated information systems. An appetite for change has been manifested, and a determination to deliver good services to children and families in West Sussex.
Challenges to sustaining improvements due to difficulties in recruiting appropriately qualified staff	This issue is discussed in Section 3 of this report. It is considered that the service has put in place measures to address these challenges through the Social Work Offer, and a three-part strategy for addressing the market scarcity of social workers is discussed at 3.3. Measures to tackle specific recruitment pressures in other parts of the service are set out at 3.5. Staff morale is improving, as confirmed by the recent staff survey and Ofsted inspectors. Finally, the enthusiasm for joining the service manifested in the level of applications for the Social Work Academy scheme (3.4) demonstrates the ability of the service to inspire careers that support the wellbeing of vulnerable children and families in West Sussex.

## 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.

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**Appendix 1:** Performance Summary to 30 April 2022

**Background Papers:** None