

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

16 November 2022

Children First Improvement Programme: progress, current position and next steps

Report by Director of Children, Young People and Learning

Summary

This report summarises the journey of improvement that Children's Services has undertaken since the adverse Ofsted judgement of May 2019 and the subsequent Commissioner's report. This report tracks the progress made since that inspection and the Commissioner's report and details how the Council has responded by providing significant financial and corporate investment into Children's Services. Having completed its final Ofsted Monitoring Visit (September 2022) and anticipating a Full Inspection in the early part of 2023, this is an opportune moment to reflect on the service's progress to date.

The report also outlines the remaining challenges facing the service in terms of ongoing demand and the need to maintain the improvements on the run up to a full inspection. The report provides an overview of the current state of the service, what more needs to be done and the challenges facing its ambition to be formally recognised as providing a 'good' level of service for vulnerable children and families in West Sussex.

Focus for Scrutiny

The Committee is asked to assess the progress made on the improvement journey over the last three years, the outcome of the recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit and the preparedness for the full Ofsted Inspection expected in the coming months.

Key Lines of Enquiry

- (1) The current position of the service, and the progress made over the last three years, and whether this demonstrates improved outcomes for children and young people are being achieved
- (2) The challenges and areas of focus identified to achieve a 'good' level of service for vulnerable children and families in West Sussex, and whether the plans to address these are sufficient
- (3) Identify any areas for consideration for future scrutiny or any areas to highlight to the Cabinet Member to focus on ahead of the forthcoming Ofsted Visit.

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

1 Regulatory Background

Ofsted Inspection 2019

- 1.1 A [full Ofsted inspection](#) of Children's Services took place between 25 February and 8 March 2019, resulting in an 'Inadequate' rating. The shortcomings were widespread and Ofsted identified 12 areas where the service needed to improve, including the quality of management, the quality of practice, the effectiveness of process, staff recruitment and retention, inadequate partnership arrangements, but above all poor outcomes for children across a range of factors. The failings in the service were considered by the regulator to be symptomatic of a wider corporate failing towards service provision for vulnerable children and families.

The Role of the Commissioner for Children's Services

- 1.2 As a result, the Secretary of State for Education issued a [first] statutory direction under section 497A(4B) of the Education Act 1996, requiring the County Council to cooperate with a newly appointed Commissioner for Children's Services in West Sussex (hereafter 'the Commissioner'). The Commissioner's role was to bring together evidence to assess the County Council's capacity and capability to improve itself, in a reasonable timeframe, and to recommend whether or not this evidence was sufficiently strong to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care in West Sussex could be achieved should it remain with the Council. The Commissioner appointed was John Coughlan, at that time the Chief Executive of Hampshire County Council and its former Director of Children's Services. The Commissioner undertook a detailed examination, both of the workings of Children's Services and the wider political and constitutional arrangements within the Council and concluded in his first report dated October 2019 that the conditions were not present for sustainable improvement at that time.

The Children's Trust

- 1.3 One of the Commissioner's recommendations was to create an *Alternative Delivery Model* (ADM), normally a Children's Trust, as a response to a service judged by Ofsted to be failing and not capable of improvement within a reasonable timeframe. The Commissioner was of the opinion at that time that an ADM was necessary to secure a sustained improvement in services in West Sussex. The Secretary of State for Education accepted this recommendation, and accordingly his second Direction (November 2019) required the Council to commence arrangements for the setting up of a Children's Trust, meaning that Children's Social Care services would be taken out of direct local authority control. The Cabinet agreed a Memorandum of Understanding to this effect in October 2020.
- 1.4 The fact that the Commissioner was able to recommend to the Department for Education (DfE) that the Children's Trust process be paused for one year (October 2021) and then withdrawn altogether (January 2022), has reflected, in unprecedented fashion, the tangible progress on corporate governance and service delivery made under the Children First programme. The dossier of evidence presented by the Council to the Commissioner demonstrated significant and consistent improvement across all his published measures of assessment. This is believed to be the first occasion on which

the DfE has been persuaded to rescind such a statutory direction and forgo its recourse to the Trust model. 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. This would not have been possible without significant political support from the Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and the wider Cabinet, and it represents a major achievement for the County Council. The ongoing political and corporate support included significant financial investment that has facilitated the delivery of the Children First Programme's key objectives and brought about a clear trajectory of improvement within the service. The high levels of corporate support and financial backing have also been acknowledged by the Commissioner in his regular reports to the Minister as evidence of the Council's ability to improve at pace and its wholehearted support for children's services.

- 1.5 Throughout the Improvement process, John Coughlan has periodically briefed all members on the progress being made and answered questions. He has proved a sound critical friend to this authority and the quality of his chairmanship of the Improvement Board and the respect with which his opinion is regarded, have been major factors in West Sussex being enabled to retain control of its Children's Services. With the change in the statutory direction regarding the Trust, John Coughlan's role as the Commissioner formally came to an end at the beginning of 2022 and he has now taken on the role of Independent Chairman of the Improvement Board, which will continue as long as the service remains judged as inadequate.

Political and Constitutional Reform

- 1.6 In response to the concerns expressed in the Commissioner's initial report, the authority took the following key steps in 2019:
- Introducing greater transparency in the conduct of business generally, as part of a Good Governance review – for instance through Cabinet meetings being held in public.
 - Revising the constitution, membership and remit of the Corporate Parenting Panel, which under the Chairmanship of the Cabinet Member for Children & Young People has enhanced its profile, becoming much more robust and seen to be making a tangible difference to outcomes for children. Children and young people now participate on the Panel and are represented in its subgroups.
 - Creating greater constructive challenge through revitalising the role of the Children & Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee. There is now a very high personal commitment and scrutiny by the Cabinet Member and other elected members regarding the progress of Children we Care for (those in care) and care experienced children (those who have left care).
 - Enhancing the Director of Children's Services (DCS) role so that it became an Executive Director post, directly accountable to the Chief Executive and enabled to undertake the full legal remit in respect both of Social Care and Education & Skills, alongside the Cabinet Member for Children & Young People, who is also the Council's Lead Member for Children.

- The Council has provided significant financial investment into the service structurally through increased revenue budgets within the service from £100m in 2019/20 to £139m in 2022/23. The Council has also specifically awarded an improvement grant to accelerate and maintain a trajectory of improvement throughout the Children First programme which has been over £6m annual for the period of the improvement programme. This financial commitment towards the Children First programme has facilitated the overall improvements across children's services at a time of extreme financial pressure within local government.
- Improving young people's participation and engagement in the design of services for them – including through the Children in Care Council.
- These measures were amongst those that influenced the Commissioner in his decision to recommend that the Children's Trust proposal was first paused, (2021) and finally withdrawn (2022).

Ofsted inspection regime

1.7 With the authority being in special measures, there has been a programme of close Ofsted scrutiny, generally with a particular emphasis on specific parts of the service. The visits undertaken are noted below, with the full reports available on the [Ofsted Website](#):

- December 2019 Monitoring Visit [Assessment & Intervention and the role of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO)]
- October 2020 Focused Visit [Quality & impact of decision making]
- May 2021 Monitoring Visit [Social work practice and a focus on permanence for children we care for]
- September 2021 Monitoring Visit [Children with disabilities]
- March 2022 Monitoring Visit [Corporate parenting]
- September 2022 Monitoring Visit [Child Protection]
- Spring 2023 Full Ofsted Inspection expected

2. The COVID-19 Pandemic

2.1 The pandemic presented many challenges to the service, especially during 2020, and inevitably introduced delays into the planned Improvement process, with Ofsted visits being suspended between March and September that year. For the service, at all times the safety of children was paramount: cases were rated for severity which determined the action needed, and all high-risk cases were closely monitored; PPE was readily available to staff and face-to-face visiting was reintroduced as soon as this was feasible. In the meantime, full use was made of remote contact through technology (to which most children responded positively), combined with cooperative partnership arrangements with schools and other stakeholders. Staff were early recipients of the vaccine and staff sickness remained low, with operational levels always in excess of 90% throughout the pandemic. This helped to maintain performance, which included managing the inevitable surges of demand experienced when schools reopened after lockdown. All government guidance was rigorously adhered to. Ofsted subsequently commented during

a motoring visit that the service had dealt effectively with the challenges of Covid-19: the service received no priority actions during the pandemic, and this was recognised as an achievement for an authority rated inadequate.

Post-pandemic Renewal and Recovery

- 2.2 Children, Young People and Learning has worked with partners since 2021 to reset services in the aftermath of Covid-19. In terms of service demand and need, the true impact of the pandemic is still being felt – most critically in terms of exacerbating pre-existing concerns about children’s mental health. The cluster of suicides in the Horsham area together with other isolated events in 2021 have led the service to a closer and more cooperative engagement with schools; at the same time, discussions are continuing with NHS partners about meeting additional need. The service is therefore learning from the demands resulting from the pandemic and has made further improvements that will keep children and young people safer in the future. These arrangements will take fuller and more formal shape through the emerging Integrated Care System (inaugurated in July 2022), comprising NHS, local authority and the voluntary sector organisations involved in delivering health care.

3. Transforming the Service

A Model for Change: Whole Service Redesign

- 3.1 In the change model adopted by the service, three ‘pillars’ have represented the fundamental principles of change:
- **Pillar 1 - ‘What good looks like’:** setting, promoting and modelling common standards and expectations.
 - **Pillar 2 - Creating the right Environment:** this includes developing ‘the Social Work Offer’ – comprising competitive remuneration, the best working environment, a balanced workload, the right equipment, professional techniques and support for staff – to make West Sussex an ‘employer of choice’.
 - **Pillar 3 - Improved Service Model:** a service offer stressing managing demand and reducing escalation through a preventive approach - always with children and families at the heart of all undertakings. This has included bringing together the three main service areas (early help, social care and education) under one departmental structure.

Children First Strategy

- 3.2 The Children First Strategy adopted in 2020 is a multi-agency strategy, setting out the ambition of a partnership of local public, community and voluntary sector services. It describes what it means to put children first in West Sussex (strategic intent); and how partners will all work together to ensure that children really do come first (culture and behaviours). The Children First strategy has been financially supported by the Council with an annual improvement budget of over £6m since 2020.

The Children First Practice Improvement Plan

- 3.3 The detailed service development work being undertaken is set out in a Practice Improvement Plan. The original plan was adopted in August 2019 and was closely aligned to the 12 main recommendations made by Ofsted in its inspection report of May 2019. A refreshed Improvement Plan was adopted in March 2020. An Investment Plan, agreed by Cabinet, has enabled the delivery of the Improvement Plan at pace.

A permanent management team

- 3.4 During 2020, Lucy Butler, the incoming Director of Children Young People and Learning swiftly recruited a high-calibre Directorate Leadership Team (DLT) that has the capacity and capability to lead and champion the improvement process. The four permanent Assistant Directors are supplemented by additional senior level temporary change managers who will continue to work with the service through to Full Inspection in 2023. The importance of a stable DLT cannot be over-stated: one of its key aims has been to create a culture that is inclusive, supportive and communicative. To this end, a wide range of opportunities have been put in place to encourage strong two-way engagement with staff. These have included staff conferences, collaborative problem-solving events, staff surveys, on-line question-and-answer sessions and the Director's weekly message to staff. Enhancing managerial capability at all levels has helped to magnify these effects, ensuring, through supervision meetings, that staff feel well supported by their manager, which they have confirmed to be the case.

Improving management capability

- 3.5 The Ofsted inspection in February 2019 and the subsequent Commissioner's report of Autumn 2019 highlighted significant weaknesses in the ability of managers to ensure that good quality social work was delivered to improve outcomes for children and their families. The service response to the original managerial deficit has been decisive and delivered through a major programme of assessment, training and coaching.
- 3.6 The Council invested in a bespoke programme for all managers in Children's Social Care at the start of 2021. Following on from the Inspection in 2019, the service had to build confidence, competence and capability in the cohort of managers across the service. Every manager was therefore put through an assessment and development session based on the Council's competency framework and the Social Work England competencies, which the service commissioned through a company called Odgers. This was co-delivered with Odgers, to provide an independent assessment that was also backed up by line management accountability.
- 3.7 The process was communicated to all staff in engagement sessions beforehand; the senior leadership team promoted it as an investment in staff and their career development. Take-up was very good: although there was some disquiet initially, this was quickly dispelled when managers started the assessment and planning sessions. The data gathered was then processed to

give the service key organisational themes for development as well as data about the functioning of each manager, which was collated into individual development plans. This enabled the service to have an overall understanding of the strengths and areas for development for all managers, which was followed up by line managers in supervision and in appraisals.

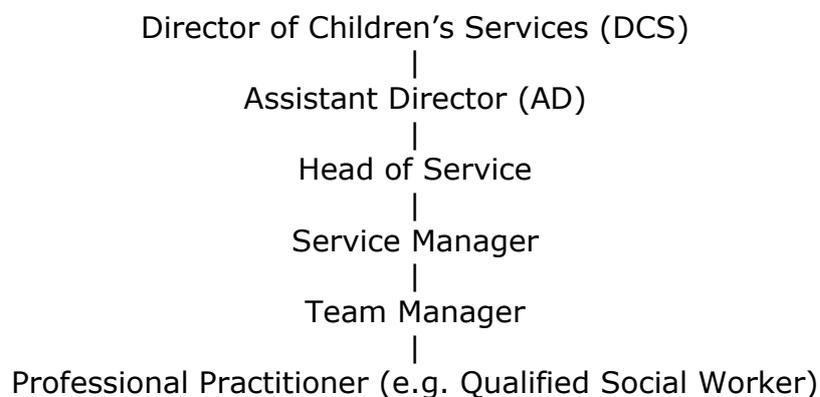
3.8 The service created a bespoke leadership and management development programme from the assessment data for all managers, building on the key themes as follows:

- putting children first and at the centre of all work, (essentially implementing the vision and improving communication and engagement across the organisation).
- empowering and engaging the teams to influence their own practice and achieve results, (the 'bottom-up approach').
- dealing with silo working, getting away from the sense of a blame culture and encouraging personal accountability.

3.9 All Social Care managers went through this programme in 2021 and the process has evolved to focus on key priority areas of problem-solving to further improve practice. The programme has been crucial to delivering the Council's aim to bring about a change in culture, with managers taking responsibility and holding accountability, and better engagement with and ownership of the issues and priorities for improvement.

New Staffing Structure

3.10 A simplified staffing structure was developed and implemented from July 2021 and is now thoroughly embedded. It addressed one of the key concerns expressed in the Commissioner's original report regarding excessive layers of management and ambiguity of job titles and roles, which he advised were hampering service effectiveness. The new structure removes ambiguity and promotes accountability as the foundation of strong performance management; it is supplemented by revised schemes of delegation that are appropriate for the new management, structured as follows:



Social Work Offer

3.11 West Sussex had long struggled to recruit high calibre staff in sufficient numbers because of a historically uncompetitive remunerative package accompanied by issues of perceived excessive workloads and low morale. Up

to June 2021, a Recruitment and Retention scheme had attempted to offset these issues but could not provide the basis for a satisfactory long-term solution. The increased revenue budgets within the service enable the Council to offer a new permanent Social Work Offer, ensuring that West Sussex is competitive in the employment market with its local authority neighbours, as an attractive and rewarding place to work.

- 3.12 The introduction of the Social Work Offer significantly changes the dynamics of the relationship between the authority and its staff in a range of positive ways. In creating a permanent competitive pay and reward model, the Offer provides a stable and assured employment environment in which professionals can build and enhance their careers through a long-term commitment to this authority. The Offer complements the other service transformation activity, which cumulatively helps to brand West Sussex as a service with high aspirations for the future and a progressive stance towards introducing the best professional techniques and standards. One of the key features of the new Offer is that it allows staff to apply for progression to higher pay grades and levels of responsibility, but only where they can demonstrate more developed skills within their working practice. In this way, strong performance and reward are tangibly linked in a way that directly benefits the service and its customers.

Embedding Quality Standards

- 3.13 These provisions in turn allow the service to specify to staff what is expected of them to achieve good practice standards and to develop a culture in which maintaining high standards becomes the norm. The link between the staff offer and expectations is now strong and helps to develop and reinforce an ethos of good quality being understood as an integral part of all working practice, with 'what good looks like' being applied as a standard element.

Motivating the Workforce

- 3.14 Despite the challenges of the pandemic and coming to terms with significant organisational change, Staff Surveys conducted in 2021 & February 2022 broadly demonstrate the workforce responding positively to the transformation agenda and showing steadfastness and pride in the journey of improvement. The service undertook a dedicated staff survey in February 2022 and used this to develop the recruitment and retention activity set out later in this report. The senior leadership team also maintain regular and ongoing communications with staff regarding recruitment and retention. The available evidence suggests that the factors involved in this positive feedback include the following:

- The benefits of the Social Work Offer, including the prospect of grade and career progression.
- Stable, energetic and visible senior management.
- Improved communication and trusted two-way messaging.
- Much greater support from line managers through supervision.

- Stabilising caseloads in most areas and a reduction in the vacancy gap.
- Greater clarity about roles, responsibilities and expectations.
- Introduction of new social work techniques.
- A clear route through a post-Covid-19 world, with recovery led by senior management, and openness to 'new ways of working'.

Demonstrating Impact

3.15 It is essential to hold in view that the purpose of all work with managers and staff is to improve the service to children and families, and that customer needs must remain at the heart of all endeavours. Impact has been demonstrated or is expected through the following means:

- Evidence from successive Ofsted Monitoring Visits, culminating in a Full Inspection in 2023.
- The views of the former Commissioner for Children's Services, John Coughlan, who retains a lead role as Chairman of the Improvement Board.
- Improvements in a range of performance indicators – for instance timeliness of visits, the routine presence of case supervision and other compliance with specified professional practice standards.
- Reduction in court activity, especially the number of Care Proceedings needing to be placed before the Court.
- Measures of quality, as identified through the monthly internal auditing process.
- Evidence of improved service-user outcomes and increased customer satisfaction, reductions in complaints etc.
- Evidence of improved working with partners – especially Health and Schools.
- Positive feedback from managers, staff and Unison.
- Successful recruitment and retention of staff, and associated wellbeing indicators.

4. Other components of Service Transformation

Family Safeguarding Model

4.1 The Family Safeguarding Model (FSM) is the foundation stone of transforming social work practice. This well reviewed approach takes the journey of the child as its starting point and puts children, young people and their families right at the heart of all service decisions. In doing so it takes full account of the child's relationships, the family context and the broader parenting

strengths and vulnerabilities that may be present. It fully grasps the primacy of early intervention, both to avoid the tragedy of family breakdown, and thereby to seek to minimise demand for costly, high-end social care services. The Council committed an extra £5.3m to this part of the service in order to introduce the model and make it sustainable going forward.

- 4.2 The Family Safeguarding Model phase 1 has been successfully introduced in February 2022, with its staffing structure, comprising Assessment and Family Safeguarding teams across the western, central and eastern areas now fully operational. A key feature is the formation of Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDTs), so that the totality of family issues can be addressed and parenting capability strengthened. Specialist adult practitioners for domestic abuse and substance misuse have come on-board during Summer 2022. This element of the model was originally to be funded by the Department for Education. However, the promised funding stream was removed by the Department in April of this year without warning. The Council continues to challenge this decision and in the meantime the service has scaled back the numbers of adult practitioner posts within the teams in an attempt to mitigate the degree of impact on the model from this decision. The remaining component is to introduce mental health practitioners through arrangements being entered into with Health partners. Maintaining the integrity and parenting capability of families means that fewer children will need to be taken into care, which in turn assists the County Council and its partners to manage otherwise potentially unsustainable costs.
- 4.3 To support the new FSM model, a restructure of staffing has led to the creation of Assessment and Family Safeguarding teams based on three geographic areas: West (equivalent to Chichester and Arun district areas), Central (Worthing, Adur and Horsham) and East (Crawley and Mid Sussex). A new Supervision system has been introduced concurrently, to provide the best support to staff and maintain improvements in practice standards.

Benefits of the Model

- 4.4 National evaluation of the model has resulted in the following benefits being delivered:

Children and Families

- Significant reductions in repeat police callouts to domestic abuse incidents between the parents of the families in the model.
- Significant reductions in emergency hospital admissions for adults of the parents of the families in the model.
- Up to a 50% reduction in use of 'care' by the local authority.
- Significant improvement in school attendance.
- A reduction in children subject to CP plans.
- A reduction in legal care proceedings.

Services

- Reductions in A&E attendance and police expenditure.
- Staff across all disciplines feel more confident and less stressed.
- Improved recruitment and retention of staff.
- Cashable efficiency savings on Council expenditure in the first full year after implementation of the model.

The new model is being implemented at pace but there remain problematic areas such as the recruitment of dedicated mental health workers for the parents in vulnerable families.

Quality Assurance and the role of auditing

- 4.5 Maintaining a strong and effective grip on practice and performance has been central to the Improvement journey to date. The Children First programme has developed and implemented a strong Performance Management Framework which is used to provide managers at all levels of the service with up-to-date reports and a cascade of performance meetings that culminate with the DCS and her leadership team. The quality of practice is a key theme running through all activities associated with the Children First Improvement agenda. It is essential to be able to measure the quality of service delivery as well as compliance with the statutory requirements, such as visiting timescales. Casework auditing fulfils a key function both in maintaining and raising quality and to provide examples of good practice. This work is overseen through a Quality Assurance Framework, supported by new Core Practice Standards, launched in November 2021 and promoted as a key resource throughout the service. Hampshire County Council, this authority's 'Partner in Practice' has supported and guided the Quality Assurance work.

Integrated Front Door

- 4.6 It has been important to ensure that an effective and efficient 'front door' to all services is developed and maintained, including the alignment of early help provision with the statutory social work activity. This has been crucial in being able to develop and evidence appropriate thresholds for intervention and assessment within the service. The Integrated Front Door was launched in January 2021, with the following features:
- Creating one pathway within Children's Services for referrals relating to children and young people.
 - Enabling a joined-up approach, with one combined Early Help and Social Care team at the Front Door.
 - Children receive a service proportionate to their needs, in a timely way.
 - A reduction in the number of transfer points on the child's journey.

- A reduction in the time from initial contact to outcome.
- Providing a simplified process for the public and professionals.
- Potentially reduce unnecessary social work interventions.

Improved Voice and Participation

4.7 Putting the child at the centre of practice is a key principle of the service improvement agenda and of good practice in general. It includes hearing and responding to the voice of the child and securing the participation of young people, both within casework and more broadly in terms not only of seeking their views but actively involving them in the design of services and facilities. This area of work has been transformed over the past three years, supported by advice from national experts, the Care Leaders Fellowship. Some of the key achievements in this area have been as follows:

- In casework, the voice of the child, once frequently absent, is now recognised as a pre-requisite of all decisions about their future, and must be manifest in the case record. For looked-after children, the language used in meetings, letters, Life Story work and other records should not only be age-appropriate but must reflect an empathic approach to corporate parenting.
- Technology has been used with increasing effectiveness, especially during the pandemic, to provide young people with the means to express themselves, both as a constructive outlet for feelings and a way of communicating sensitively with their social worker.
- The role of children and young people is embedded in governance processes and decision-making. An outstanding example is their representation on the Corporate Parenting Panel and its sub groups.
- The Children in Care Council allows cared-for young people to have their voice heard about the services that affect them.
- A Care Leaver Executive Group and Care Leaver Advisory Board give young people on the verge of independence a voice in decisions that affect them.
- The Youth Cabinet and Youth MPs are fully established as active participants in discussions across a range of issues; they regularly engage with County Council members and are a respected part of the local democratic process.
- Promises, Pledges and Charters set out for children the standard of service they can expect to receive, with young people having been involved in their development.
- The annual EPIC (Exceptional People in Care) Awards celebrate the achievements of the many young people nominated and have continued to thrive and expand over the past three years.

Information Systems

- 4.8 The service needs a comprehensive information system as an integral part of achieving a modern, partnership-based service. Operating with 11 separate systems where information about children is recorded, from a total of 6 different suppliers, has been a handicap. The Council has supported a major transformation programme to improve and streamline these systems and this has included a dedicated grant of £1.8m over two years to support it. A new contract to provide a solution to consolidate and integrate systems commenced on 1 April 2022 for an initial period of 2 years, with an option to extend by up to 2 years. 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; it will also support improved partnership working.

5. Specific Service Area Improvements

This section presents highlights of changes to specific areas of the service undertaken as part of the overall transformation programme.

Children Looked After and Care Leavers' Strategy 2020-2024

- 5.1 This [Strategy](#) represents a key aspect of improving the County Council's services to children and young people. It formalises the service commitment to ensure that children who are looked after by the authority are happy, healthy and safe, and have the opportunity to achieve their full potential. The new Strategy was agreed by the Cabinet Member for adoption in December 2020.

Improving Permanence Planning

- 5.2 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. Ofsted in 2019 found an inconsistent approach to permanence planning in West Sussex, leading to a large number of children experiencing drift and delay, thereby lacking stability and the opportunity to build their lives in a secure environment.
- 5.3 This situation has been radically improved, both through the transformation of the Corporate Parenting Panel, discussed at 1.6 above, and through initiatives driven by senior management. 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.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

- 5.4 During the journey of improvement the service has taken its full share in supporting unaccompanied children from overseas seeking asylum. These children are vulnerable and have frequently experienced trauma, and 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, and this obligation has been fulfilled.

Fostering Service Redesign

- 5.5 The County Council aims to create a high performing Fostering Service that provides those Children we Care for (CwCf) with the best start in life. A two-phase programme to redesign and transform the Fostering Service commenced with a decision to ensure that from April 2021, all internal foster carers received the same skills level payment for each child, where more than one child was in their care. In Phase 2 (from March 2022), work commenced to ensure the County Council can strengthen its market position by offering in-house foster placements to different cohorts of children with a broad range of needs, strengthen the offer to existing carers to improve retention, and increase the social care workforce to ensure caseloads for staff within the service are manageable.
- 5.6 These measures will help to address current challenges being faced in the fostering market, improve the ratio of in-house foster carers to independent providers and transform the Fostering Service to the desired position of becoming the 'provider of choice' for current and future foster carers across West Sussex. This work will result in enhanced life experiences for cared-for children, supported by an investment enabling the Council to manage sufficiency budgets more effectively and control the costs of placements.

Early Help Redesign

- 5.7 Following broad public and internal consultation during the early part of 2021, with Cabinet approval a redesign of the Early Help service was implemented in October 2021. The effect was to configure the resources of the service to enhance service delivery to children and families in the community, thereby maximising impact; at the same time the administrative burden of maintaining an excessive number of buildings was rationalised, with 12 centres retained around the county, and a hub system instituted so that Early Help and Children's Social Care are now much more closely aligned.

Residential Services

5.8 The Residential Service has been transformed over the past three years, with a comprehensive programme of renewal that has led to three homes that were previously closed, now being reopened with new facilities. At the time of writing this report, four out of six of the homes are 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 the sector, and the service is continuing to explore all avenues to fill vacancies.
- **Phase 2:** Design work for the remaining homes has now completed. The tendering process for a contractor to deliver the work at Orchard House has commenced. The tender period for the homes in Crawley will commence in early 2023. High-level and indicative completion dates are:
 - ❖ Orchard House Children's Home – End of 2023.
 - ❖ West Green Family Time Hub – Late 2023 (this vacant youth centre will be repurposed for the Family Time Contact Service, allowing it to vacate 40 Teasel Close).
 - ❖ 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).
 - ❖ High Trees Children's Home – End of 2024.
 - ❖ 18 Teasel Close Children's Home – Mid 2025.
- **Phase 3:** Scoping work is continuing in order to develop plans to further expand the service to meet demand.

Youth Justice Inspection, March 2022

5.9 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. This County Council service sits within Children's Social Care. The Probation Inspectorate, the regulatory body for this service conducted an inspection of the Youth Justice Service from 14-18 March 2022. The [inspection outcomes](#) were very favourable, with an overall rating of 'good' and some parts of the service being rated 'outstanding'. This is testimony to the quality of preventative work the service is delivering to minimise the number of children entering the criminal justice system and to promote their best outcomes in terms of safety, education and wellbeing.

6. Current and Impending Issues

6.1 The West Sussex transformation programme closely aligns with national level proposals to reform social care – especially through rebalancing the social

care system towards early family support, the removal of unnecessary bureaucracy and focusing on the right outcomes for children. The aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, understanding children and young people's mental health needs and working effectively with the NHS to address them, as well as challenges posed to families by the rising cost of living, will all continue to impact on the demand for the service.

Achieving a 'Good' service

6.2 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; the Family Safeguarding Model becoming operational with all its Adult-facing components present will greatly support this objective.
- **Leadership:** continue to develop effective professional leadership and management capability throughout the service.
- **Partnerships:** achieve effective partnership working, delivery and strategic planning. For most children and families in crisis, a solution is likely to involve some kind of partnership undertaking. The emergent Integrated Care System (ICS) a formal partnership of NHS, local authorities and the voluntary sector organisations involved in delivering health care collaboratively under new government rules, will form an important vehicle for taking this agenda forward.

Ofsted full Inspection 2023

6.3 A full-service inspection by Ofsted under the ILACS (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services) framework is expected in the Spring of 2023. This illustrates how vital it is that the service achieves full realisation of the three key priorities above, bringing them to a state of fruition. The anticipated inspection will mark the start of a new phase in the service's history, giving a fresh objective assessment and setting the frame for consistently higher standards in the coming period. The senior leadership team has prepared for this by maintaining close scrutiny and oversight on all aspects of service delivery and improvement activity.

Addressing areas of continuing under-performance

6.4 Ofsted has frequently commented that the senior leadership team has a realistic grasp of the condition of the service and those areas that continue to require improvement. The Ofsted monitoring visit programme together with the monthly Improvement Boards have ensured that the service remains fully focused on the ongoing challenges and areas of underperformance. Although there has been significant progress as demonstrated by this report, the senior leadership team is not complaisant and it continues to identify and tackle the significant areas of underperformance within the service.

6.5 Through our regular performance management reporting it is evident that the service is still unable to provide a consistently high-quality service across all areas. The quality and impact of social work practice for children in need

and children in need of protection continue to remain very variable. There is an acknowledgement that due to high demand, the pace of service changes and staff turnover, the performance at time remains too variable and this is a risk. This was noted by Ofsted in their most [recent monitoring visit](#) when they stated, 'The quality and impact of social work intervention are variable, although some practice is strong. Too many children experience changes of social workers, and they are waiting too long for assessment and to receive the support that they need. Some plans for children in need of protection end prematurely at the first review'. The service is also aware of the ongoing issues related to the timeliness of allocating statutory social work cases for assessment and care planning as well as the overall timelines of recording and visiting vulnerable children. These issues all represent a risk to the Council's ability to evidence significant change and improvement for a full inspection.

- 6.6 Action plans are in place to address these areas and the service has held problem-solving events for managers and staff in order to gain all perspectives on the presenting issues and their potential solutions. The Departmental Leadership team maintains a strong focus on performance across the service and ensures that it is ready for an inspection at any time. The performance reporting is aggregated into a quarterly self-evaluation document which describes the current improvement trajectory and how areas of underperformance will be tackled. Ofsted has acknowledged the overall management grip within the service at a number of the monitoring visits. However, it must be acknowledged that the service still has further improvement work to do to ensure a consistent and sustainable level of service.
- 6.7 To tackle these issues, the performance problem solving events are a good example of the management grip referred to by Ofsted. In order to understand and challenge poor performance in some of the social work teams, a number of performance problem solving sessions, chaired by the Director of Children's Services, were set up during May and June 2022 to understand the issues and provide appropriate support and challenge. The sessions focused on:
- Understanding the reason for teams with the poorest performance
 - The strengths and challenges that the managers and the team face to 'get to good' and to meet the expected regulatory performance standards
 - Plans to address the challenges in the next three months, with a practice action plan template for completion
 - As part of this session a team performance slide was produced
- 6.8 Managers reported the sessions as helpful and strength based. A number of themes were identified to improve the functioning of the teams concerned. These have been acted upon and form part of existing action plans, such as improving recruitment; improved workforce planning to create more capacity; the improved use of Mosaic (electronic recording tool) and IT support; more focus on practice to ensure effective management oversight; use of tools such as the daily dashboard and timely completion of tasks.

- 6.9 The impact of the sessions led to improved performance in the teams, including improved performance in statutory child protection visits across the county, case recording activity and management supervision. More sessions are planned the Autumn, to include those teams that are performing well and those that still have areas for development.

Staff recruitment and retention

- 6.10 Ongoing staffing recruitment and retention continue to be a challenge and vacancy rates remain higher than the service would like. This does pose a degree of risk to both the pace and sustainability of the improvement work and remains under close scrutiny by the senior leadership team. Professional staff are a scarce commodity nationwide, at a time of rising demand in the service. Not only is there a dearth of professionally qualified specialists (e.g. social workers, nurses and mental health practitioners), but also in early help roles such as children and family workers and healthcare workers in early years programmes – all of which can impact upon service capability. Recruitment and retention of social workers presents a particular challenge to all local authorities, both now and into the future. These issues are exacerbated by locum agency staff predominantly working in project team contracts, leaving very few for individual local positions. However, the service has three specific and complementary strategies to respond to recruitment issues:

- A new service model to reduce 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.
- Making the professional staff group 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.
- A dedicated recruitment activity which includes regular and ongoing national and international recruitment projects. Recently the service has completed an overseas recruitment in South Africa which has resulted in recruiting 36 high calibre candidates who will be inducted into the social work teams in early 2023. Additionally, recruitment activity also includes growing new staffing capability through promoting entry schemes such as the in-house Social Work Academy and apprenticeships. The service has also recruited 30 newly qualified social workers, who have now been inducted into the service during September 2022.
- An ongoing focus on staff retention is also in place, to improve the well being of our staff and to become an employer of choice

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 This report has summarised an unparalleled period of activity within the service, marked by its intensity, the exacting standards set and the breadth of topics being covered. There is an acknowledgement that turning around a

previously 'inadequate' service is a significant and enduring commitment by the Council, which has required significant financial investment to develop and implement the Children First programme. This programme has been fully supported and resourced by the Council and needs to be seen as an ongoing and iterative process. At the present time the Council is three years into this journey and the Children First programme can evidence significant progress and improvement against the challenges set by Ofsted and the Commissioner. These improvements (across the service) continue to be verified by Ofsted in its sequence of Monitoring Visits and through the evidence presented and scrutinised by the previous Commissioner, now the Independent Chairman of the Improvement Board. With the satisfactory completion of its final Monitoring Visit, the service is now in a high state of preparedness for full Inspection in the early part of 2023.

8. Other options considered

8.1 Not applicable - this is a report for information.

9. Resource

9.1 Costs for the activities described in this report have only been possible with the significant increase of the Children's service budget over the last three years. This increase has included financial investment in front line service delivery together with a dedicated improvement budget which has been agreed by the Cabinet and monitored by the senior leadership team. Although there continue to be risks associated with the overall budget within Children's Services, the Transformation budget has been closely monitored and spent according to the plan and is projected to balance this year.

10. Risk implications and mitigations

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
To maintain the level of improvement and sustain the progress made to date up to and beyond the full inspection	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.
Recruitment and retention of suitably qualified and experienced	The service has put in place measures to address these challenges through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Social Work Offer

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
staff and the impact of this on the Council's ability to sustaining improvements and maintain high levels of service provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • three-part strategy for addressing the market scarcity of social workers • implemented measures to tackle specific recruitment pressures in other parts of the service <p>Staff morale is improving, as confirmed by the staff surveys and Ofsted inspectors. The enthusiasm for joining the service manifested through the Social Work Academy scheme demonstrates the ability of the service to inspire careers that support the wellbeing of vulnerable children and families in West Sussex.</p>
Financial risk of overspend due to the complexity and increased numbers of high-cost placements for both children we care for and those maintained at home	A set of financial recovery plans have been developed and implemented within the service. They are led by the operational Assistant Directors and focus on the management of risk and providing value for money for these placements.

11. Policy alignment and compliance

- 11.1 **Equality Duty and human rights assessment-** 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.
- 11.2 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.
- 11.3 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.
- 11.4 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.

- 11.5 **Social Value** - 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.
- 11.6 **Crime and Disorder Implications** - 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.

Lucy Butler
Director of Children, Young People and Learning

Contact Officer: Vince Clark, Transformation Director, 07402 338396
vince.clark@westsussex.gov.uk

Background Papers: None