
Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children Services Judgement of the County Council's Children's Services 11 May 2023

Introduction

Ofsted undertook the full Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) for West Sussex County Council from 13 to 24 March 2023, undertaking a thorough and comprehensive inspection of the service. Their report, recently published **and attached at Appendix 1**, recognises that 'Services for children and families in West Sussex County Council have substantially improved' and that 'a relentless and incremental approach to improving practice has led to significant progress'.

The Leader and Cabinet Member are pleased to present this report as a summary of the outcome of the inspection and its independent endorsement of the significant investment and political commitment to improvement of these critical services over the last three and a half years and the corporate systems and governance which have enabled them to be realised.

This was confirmed by the Ofsted judgements following the inspection.

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

1. Background and Context

- 1.1 This report and Ofsted judgement confirms the progress made by the Council is substantial and reverses the inadequate judgement of the last ILACS inspection in February 2019. The Ofsted report makes clear that West Sussex County Council has made 'substantial progress' and there is now, 'a strong, determined and cohesive leadership team' in place. The regulator also acknowledged the progress made across the Council, where the previous 'corporate and political weaknesses have been addressed'. The overall effectiveness of Children's Services is judged to be 'Requires improvement to be good' with the impact of leaders on the social work practice with children and families judged to be 'Good'.
- 1.2 The shortcomings outlined within the 2019 inspection were widespread 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. These failings in the service were considered by the regulator to be

symptomatic of a wider corporate failing and this in turn led the Secretary of State requiring the County Council to cooperate with a Commissioner for Children's Services in West Sussex (hereafter 'the Commissioner').

- 1.3 The Commissioner's role was to bring together evidence to assess the County Council's capacity and capability to improve itself and he undertook a detailed examination, both of the workings of Children's Services and the wider political and constitutional arrangements. One of the Commissioner's recommendations was to create an Alternative Delivery Model (a Children's Trust), which would have taken Children's Services out of the Council responsibility.
- 1.4 Following the 2019 inspection and Commissioner's report, the Council embarked on a comprehensive review and transformation of the service which included a Council-wide Good Governance review and the creation of a new Department of Children Young People and Learning. This report outlines the significant changes and improvements that have taken place since the inspection and Commissioner's report at a political, corporate and service level. The Ofsted report published on 11 May 2023 demonstrates that the Council's actions, commitment and resources have been used well and have been highly effective. The regulator has acknowledged the improvements made corporately to cement the organisational culture, leadership and management which have led to the required improvements in professional practice to achieve sustainable change.

2. Timeline of Corporate and Service Improvement

- 2.1 In response to the previous Ofsted report and 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 example through more frequent Cabinet meetings in public that include contributions from scrutiny committees and other members.
 - Ensuring that the portfolio of the lead member for children (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People) encompassed all services for children and families including services for schools. The Cabinet Member, who has held the post throughout the improvement period, has maintained a firm, rigorous leadership oversight and has done so with the backing of the Cabinet and through regular updates to the public meetings of full Council.
 - Revised the constitution, membership and remit of the Corporate Parenting Panel, which under the chairmanship of the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People has enhanced its profile, becoming more robust and delivering tangible improvements to outcomes for children. Children and young people now participate on the Panel and are represented in its subgroups.
 - Creating greater constructive challenge through a revised Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee. The Cabinet Member and other elected members provide a high personal commitment and scrutiny towards the progress of Children we Care for (those in care) and care experienced children (those who have left care).

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- 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.
 - The Council has provided significant financial investment into the service through a 39% increase in revenue budgets by 2022/23 and a dedicated improvement grant to accelerate and maintain a trajectory of improvement throughout the ‘Children First’ programme, over £6m annual for the period of the improvement programme.
 - Improving young people’s participation and engagement in the design of services for them – including through the Children in Care Council.
- 2.2 These measures were amongst those that influenced the Secretary of State’s decision to first pause (2021) and then withdraw (2022) the statutory direction that a Children’s Trust should replace the Council’s management of the service. This was the first and only time the Secretary of State has rescinded such a decision and was a mark of confidence in the Council’s turn-around and ability to improve at pace.
- 2.3 With the authority being in special measures, there has been a robust framework of improvement activity to support the required change since 2019, which included;
- Six Ofsted monitoring visits
 - A monthly Improvement Board independently chaired by John Coughlan
 - Significant financial investment to deliver a wide-ranging transformation programme, Children First, which have led to a comprehensive service redesign
 - Cultural and a comprehensive service re-design to deliver improved professional practice across social work teams and the early help service
 - A focus on the leadership and management across the department to improve oversight and accountability of all areas of practice
 - Full engagement with the Department for Education which led to the decision to rescind the proposed Children’s Trust (February 2022)
- 2.4 This progress has been achieved despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and all the restrictions on the workforce and changes in demand this led to. Throughout the pandemic, 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 co-operative 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.

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- 2.5 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 serious incidents in the Horsham area together with other isolated events in 2021 led to closer and more co-operative engagement with schools; at the same time, work is underway 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.
- 2.6 The senior leadership team has taken a ‘relentless and incremental approach to improving practice’, implementing change across the department, embedded a culture of Children First over the last four years with all staff, to improve the quality and standards of professional practice for children and families across West Sussex.

Financial Investment to support the improvement and transformation of the service

- 2.7 From the outset there was political commitment by the Cabinet and by full Council for the financial investment required to enable the Council to realise the level of transformation required. The scale and pace of the improvement in the children’s services has only been possible with the significant increase of the budget since the last inspection in 2019. The summary below set out how those additional resources, both revenue and capital, have been deployed.
- 2.8 This financial investment has included increased revenue budgets within the service from £100m in 2019/20 to £139m in 2022/23. This increase has been used to facilitate the major service re-designs in the children and family social work teams, the fostering service, the management redesign, improved social work pay and conditions offer and dedicated recruitment activity. Specifically, the Council’s increased revenue spending has enabled the delivery of the Family Safeguarding model which has meant an increase in staffing numbers, dedicated Motivational Interviewing training for all of our staff and (for the first time) the implementation of specialist adult workers within the service.
- 2.9 This increase in revenue spend was also used to provide the initial phase 1 of the Fostering re-design to provide more funding to enhance payments to the Council’s foster carers and then the implementation of phase 2 of the service redesign which provided higher levels of staffing to support improved recruitment, assessment and support to our carers.
- 2.10 The Council has also specifically awarded a dedicated transformation improvement grant to accelerate and maintain a trajectory of improvement throughout the Children First programme which has been over £6m annually for the period of the improvement programme. This financial commitment towards the Children First programme has enabled the Department to implement comprehensive service re-design, workforce development, better use of technology, practice improvement and corporate parenting workstreams that have been fully supported by dedicated project managers. The dedicated budget provided extra improvement managers and project managers to ensure

the Children First programme was implemented at pace whilst allowing operational staff and managers to remain focused on service delivery.

- 2.11 The final strand of the Council's financial investment into the service is related to the increase in capital spend in the region of £12m which was predominantly used to review and improve the in-house residential provision. The resource has been used to close and re-build three of the Council's residential homes, which re-opened as state-of-the-art provision for the children we care for. The extra budget was also used to re-furbish the remaining three residential homes, providing an in-house residential provision that is now acknowledged by the regulator as providing a physical environment that is of an extremely high standard.
- 2.12 This investment programme represents a substantial commitment by the Cabinet and whole Council towards Children, Young People and Learning and is indicative of the high priority that the Council puts on its children's services. It also marks a statement of intent to not only address previous underfunding but to put the service on a sure and sustainable footing to ensure the improvement work will continue.

3. Comprehensive Improvement and Transformation of the Service

- 3.1 Director of Children's Services and her leadership Team developed the Children First programme which included three 'pillars' to represent 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 Programme

- 3.2 The Children First programme of improvement and transformation was adopted in 2020 is a comprehensive framework of activity guided by the Children First Vision, which set out the ambition and road map for improving the outcomes of children and families in West Sussex. It describes what it means to put children first in West Sussex (strategic intent); and how the Council (with its strategic partners) will all work together to ensure that children really do come first (culture and behaviours). As outlined above this comprehensive transformation programme has been funded in addition to the revenue increase to the service budgets to provide a high degree of pace and breadth to the process.

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 the Cabinet, has enabled the delivery of the Improvement Plan at pace, culminating in the ILACS in March 2023.

A permanent senior management team

- 3.4 One of the first stages of improvement that was implemented by Lucy Butler, the incoming Director of Children Young People and Learning, was to recruit a high-calibre Directorate Leadership Team (DLT) that had the capacity and capability to lead and champion the improvement process. 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 an independent partner. This was co-delivered with the independent partner, 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 an improved 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. Practice improvement is now underpinned by a robust Performance Management and Quality Assurance framework, which enables managers at all levels of the service to know their service and ensure appropriate actions are in place to maintain the trajectory of improvement that our children and young people deserve.
- 3.14 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.

Motivating the Workforce

- 3.15 Despite the challenges of the pandemic and coming to terms with significant organisational change, Staff Surveys conducted in 2021 and February 2022 broadly demonstrate the workforce responding positively to the transformation agenda and showing steadfastness and pride in the journey of improvement. 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

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- 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'

Service Re-design

- 3.16 An initial part of the re-design was the development of an integrated 'front door' to the service. 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 2020, 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
- 3.17 The Family Safeguarding Model (FSM) is one of the foundation stones 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.
- 3.18 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 so that the totality of family issues can be addressed and parenting capability strengthened. Specialist adult practitioners for domestic abuse and substance misuse have also been introduced successfully. The remaining component is to introduce mental health practitioners through the new arrangements 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. This element of the model was originally to be funded by the Department for Education; however, the promised funding stream was not forthcoming. Despite this, the Council has continued to fund the model.

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- 3.19 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.

Fostering Service Redesign

- 3.20 Another key aspect to the overall improvement was the Council's ambition to create a high performing Fostering Service that provides those Children we Care for 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, introduce the Mocking bird model and increase the social care workforce to ensure caseloads for staff within the service are manageable.
- 3.21 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

- 3.22 The Council also undertook a major review and improvement of the Early Help service. 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.
- 3.23 These improvement were made alongside a range of other developments within children's social care including improvements to the Council's in-house residential provision, expanding and improving our service to unaccompanied asylum seeking children, expanding the virtual school which provides a dedicated education service to the children we look after, improvements in the permanency planning and life story work for the children we care for and starting the process of expanding the service we offer to our care leavers.

Demonstrating Impact

- 3.24 It is essential to hold in view that the purpose of all this work 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 through the following means:

- Evidence from successive Ofsted Monitoring Visits, culminating in the ILACS in 2023
- The confidence and support of the former Commissioner for Children's Services, John Coughlan, who chaired 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. The Ofsted report: published on 11 May 2023

4.1 The Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services was undertaken by Ofsted 13 and 24 March 2023. The report opens with the statement that, 'Services for children and families in West Sussex County Council have substantially improved since the inspection in 2019.' It goes on to outline the change in how the Council has made the changes with improved corporate governance and has backed the improvement programme with significant political support and financial resources. Senior leaders know the service well and are realistic in their understanding of the service strengths and areas for improvement. The Council is aware that more work is needed to ensure that all children in West Sussex receive a consistently good and ultimately outstanding level of service.

4.2 The Ofsted report is attached at Appendix 1 but key findings are summarised as follows:

- Most children coming into care make good progress
- The voice of children and young people is strong and well-considered in decision-making
- Early Help support is making a positive difference to children's lives
- Staff benefit from a wide range of support, and training and development opportunities; and feel valued
- The implementation of the new Family Safeguarding practice model has been carefully considered with clear plans for the next steps
- Partnership working is improving, although there is more to do
- Leaders have been determined to shift the organisational culture and put children first
- Practice in some teams is variable and more work is needed to ensure all children receive a consistent service
- The advice and support provided to care leavers aged 21 and over requires further improvement
- Placement choices for children who are looked after requires improvement

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- There needs to be a stronger response to specific children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless or who are missing from home

Responding to the Ofsted report and judgements

- 4.3 This inspection outcome confirms that significant improvements have been made within Children's Services following the support and resources provided by the Council. Senior leaders are proud of what has been achieved across the service by all staff and managers. They consider the report to be fair and balanced, as it accurately reflects the key elements of the improvement journey, the significant progress that has been made, the areas still to be further improved and reflects accurately where the services are now. Importantly, it also reflects to senior leaders and staff that their understanding of the service; illustrated in the existing self-evaluation and practice improvement plan, was accurate and that they knew themselves well.
- 4.4 The report provides the Council with evidence and validation of the significant improvements and transformation that has been successfully completed and establishes that the service will no longer be in special measures. This in turn will enhance the confidence of staff and managers and will build on restoring the reputation of the service and the Council as a whole. It is expected that this will also provide further motivation to staff to make the necessary continuous improvements in the future.

5. Delivering continuous improvement and 'getting to good' and outstanding

- 5.1 This is a significant milestone for the Council as part of the journey towards being an outstanding children's services. However, the leadership team is not complacent and they fully acknowledge what needs to improve as outlined within the Ofsted report. Plans are already in place to ensure there is continuous improvement across the service. Senior leaders and managers are implementing the vision of 'Children First' and prioritising the organisational change and strengths-based practice across all areas of the department, including the further embedding of the Family Safeguarding model. More work with partner agencies including police, health and education to deliver effective services that meet the needs of children in a timely way, will be required.
- 5.2 Engagement events with staff and managers are planned from May 2023 to consult on the priorities and areas of improvement as well as to celebrate the success that has been achieved so far. The framework used to prepare for the Ofsted inspection and ensure all areas of practice are effectively overseen by managers will continue, although these meetings will now be known as 'getting to good' meetings. The focus will be on the seven areas of improvement identified by Ofsted plus other priority areas of practice. The areas to improve identified by Ofsted are as follows:
- The timeliness and quality of strategy discussions and child protection investigations
 - The consistent quality and effectiveness of assessments and plans for children in need and children in need of protection
 - The response to children aged 16 to 17 who present as homeless

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- The timeliness of initial health assessments and access to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) for specialist assessments and therapeutic support when children are in care
 - The completion of return home interviews and their impact on planning for children when they go missing
 - Sufficiency of placement choice when children come into care
 - The quality of advice and support provided to care leavers aged 21 and over and unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people as they transition their leave to remain
- 5.3 Other key areas of practice and priorities will continue to receive scrutiny and monitoring of performance at the relevant governance boards or at Departmental Leadership Team to progress the service to good and then outstanding. For example, key priorities already in progress such as:
- the participation of children across all areas of services
 - the recruitment and retention of staff across the department
 - placement sufficiency for children we care for
 - the development of our staff and managers to embed further a strength-based relationship model including the development of a management academy to support this
 - to further shift and embed the organisational culture to enable the service to 'get to good and outstanding'
- 5.4 There is more work needed with partner agencies, particularly with our health and police partners, to improve access to child and adolescent mental health services and therapeutic support, initial health assessments for children we care for and the timeliness of strategy discussions. Plans are already in place to start working more closely with our mental health partners to ensure that there are effective pathways and provision for children and young people. Further work with our accommodation providers to improve placement sufficiency and choice for children we care for is already in place, and will require effort, determination and commitment to improve choice, given the current national challenges.
- 5.5 It is planned that there will be a realigned Improvement Board to continue to focus on the areas of practice outlined above. Alongside this, the transformation programme and the practice improvement plan are being reviewed and updated to ensure their effectiveness going forward and that they impact upon the areas of improvement outlined in the Ofsted inspection report.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 This report confirms that the unparalleled period of activity within the service, marked by its intensity, the exacting standards set; and the breadth of topics being covered has been an overwhelming success and has put the Council's children's services back on a sure footing. The outcome of this ILACS is the result of the Council's corporate leadership and support to ensure children's

services are at the heart of everything we do. The Council also wishes to acknowledge that turning around a previously 'inadequate' service is a significant and enduring commitment by everyone involved, the Director of Children's Services, Managers, staff, our children and young people and our partners. It has also required significant financial investment to develop and implement the Children First programme and will continue to be fully supported and resourced by the Council as an ongoing and iterative process.

- 6.2 At the present time the Council is three years into this journey, it can be proud of the progress and improvement achieved set against the challenges set by Ofsted and the Commissioner in 2019. These improvements (across the service) have now been verified by Ofsted ILACS and through the evidence presented and scrutinised by the previous Commissioner.

7. Actions and next steps

- (1) The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Learning and Skills and the DCS will work with the independent chair to scope out the focus of activity for the next six months for the Improvement Board as the Council transitions out of special measures.
- (2) The Council will continue to support the improvement of strengths-based practice for children and their families across the department and with partner agencies as outlined in the Children First programme to ensure a consistently good or outstanding quality of services are delivered.
- (3) The Cabinet Member, the Leader and all of the Cabinet will continue to champion and support the investment in the improvement programme and the successful realisation of our ambitions for the wellbeing of the children and families of West Sussex

Recommended

That the report be noted.

Paul Marshall

Leader

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Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Ofsted Report

Background papers

None