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**To: Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)**

**28 January 2021**

**Subject: Children's Services Continuous Improvement Progress and Covid Update**

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**1 Purpose of the Note**

- 1.1 To inform the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) of the progress with Children's Services improvement reported to the Continuous Improvement Executive Group on 9 December 2020. The next Continuous Improvement Executive Group will be held on 10 February 2021.
- 1.2 Also to provide an interim update to the Board on the impact of Covid on vulnerable children and families

**2 Recommendations**

- 2.1 The Education and Children's Scrutiny Board (2) are recommended to:
  - 1) To note the current progress
  - 2) Identify any areas the Board may want to look at in more detail
  - 3) Identify any further recommendations for the appropriate Cabinet Member

**3 Information/Background**

- 3.1 Ofsted re-inspected Children's Services on 6<sup>th</sup> - 30<sup>th</sup> March 2017, the outcome of the inspection was published on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2017, Children's Services were judged as "requires improvement to be good".
- 3.2 A report on the future arrangements for continuing and sustaining improvements in Coventry was presented by the Independent Chair and the Director of Children's Services at Improvement Board on 3 October 2018. It was agreed that the Children's Services Improvement Board is replaced by a Continuous Improvement Executive Group to retain political and corporate oversight of Children's Services Continuous Improvement.
- 3.3 The Continuous Improvement Executive Group ensure tighter focus on continuous improvement and Ofsted preparation. The impact of performance is managed and monitored by the group. This is an interim measure before returning to business as usual in accordance with the revised arrangements for Children's Safeguarding, and subject to satisfactory inspection. At this time the Executive Group would cease and oversight transferred to Coventry Safeguarding Children's Partnership and monitored as business as usual. Board members fully supported the revised arrangements and membership of the group.
- 3.4 The Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive continue to give public commitment that Children's Services remains a key priority for the Council. This includes prioritising funding for Children's Services to maintain its capacity to improve. The Council, alongside partner organisations continue a relentless focus on securing improvements in services for children, young people and families to ensure they are safeguarded and achieve positive outcomes.

- 3.5 The Ofsted framework (ILACS) includes focused visits to local authorities who are judged to be 'requires improvement'. Children's Services have received two visits. The first visit was held on 30-31 January 2018. The visit focused on the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). The letter confirming the outcome of the visit was published on 22 February 2018.
- 3.6 A further focused visit was held on 26-27 February 2019. The visit focused on permanency planning and achieving permanency. The letter confirming the outcome of the visit was published on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2019.
- 3.7 The Ofsted Annual Conversation with regional representatives is undertaken each year, the meeting last year took place in March 2020. The meeting is part of a broader meeting covering education and early years.
- 3.8 In March 2020, Ofsted paused ILACS inspections due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Children's Services was anticipating a standard Inspection by September 2020. Ofsted published their interim plans for a phased return to routine inspections which commenced from September 2020. The Interim visits were paused again during the November 2020 lockdown.
- 3.9 A report proposing arrangements to transfer Children's Services Continuous Improvement to Coventry Safeguarding Children's Partnership was approved by the Children's Services Continuous Improvement Executive Group on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2020. The new arrangements will be effective from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021, the governance in place will ensure that Children's Services continuous improvement remains a political priority. Education and Children's Scrutiny Board members will continue to receive reports on Children's Services continuous improvement and progress on a quarterly basis.
- 3.10 On 5 January 2021 a further national lockdown was announced. Ofsted have confirmed that interim focused visits will be undertaken during the national lockdown period commencing from February 2021, changes will be made to make the process more manageable and proportionate.

#### **4 Children's Services Continuous Improvement Progress**

- 4.1 The Continuous Improvement plan was reviewed by Executive Group board members on 9 December 2020. The plan has been updated to reflect current progress and has received critical challenge from the Independent Chair on the impact of actions. The completion of actions in the plan will be signed off by the Continuous Improvement Executive Group on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021, before arrangements transfer to the Coventry Safeguarding Children's Partnership on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021.

#### **5 Children's Services response and impact of COVID-19**

- 5.1 Children's Services continue to maintain core service delivery, delivering ongoing protection, support and intervention to vulnerable families across Coventry during the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 5.2 All buildings have remained open, services have continued to operate during the November 2020 national lockdown period, risk assessments are regularly updated to reflect the changes in government guidance and are disseminated to staff. Virtual visits have continued throughout the service where it is safe to do so.
- 5.3 Children's Homes have continued to operate within the operating risk assessment. Broad Park House has remained open offering short breaks both targeted and community breaks.
- 5.4 Staff who can work effectively from home have continued to be based at home. The service continues to be under pressure with the increased numbers of child in need work, increased numbers of Child Protection work and LAC numbers increasing. Caseloads are higher than average and recruiting to experienced social worker vacancies remain a significant challenge.

## **6 Workforce**

- 6.1 The recruitment and retention of experienced frontline Children and Families Social Workers is a challenge facing all local authorities across the country. The most recent DFE Social Workforce Data indicates (2019) that there is an acute shortage of Experienced Children and Families Social Workers particularly those who are three years post qualified. The operating environment for the recruitment of experienced social workers has become increasingly challenging since the pandemic.
- 6.2 The Children's Services Workforce Development Strategy supports and improves the recruitment and retention of social workers, and children's services practitioners by developing the training and development offer, focusing on improving the capability of staff to engage children, young people and families by enabling them to assess, make judgements, decisions and 'hold risk' whilst creating solutions with families and multi-agency partners. The strategy has delivered a number of key initiatives:
- A number of Recruitment Campaigns to promote Coventry City Council Childrens Services as a first-choice destination for Social Workers to practice.
  - A successful Coventry Social Work Academy has seen 58 Newly Qualified Social Workers commencing the Academy since July 2018.
  - A revised Children's Services Social Work Progression and Career Pathway Framework
  - A Children's Services 'Grow our own Social Work Scheme' and National Fast Track Pre-Qualifying Social Work Programmes; Step Up and Frontline programme.
  - The service has supported the 'Social Work Together' government campaign supporting the current COVID-19 pandemic enabling social workers who have retired in the last two years to be fast tracked to apply to return to practice.
  - A return to practice scheme to enable Children and Families Social Workers to return to the profession.
  - A comprehensive learning and development Offer that is fit for purpose and supports practitioners to continuously improve the services provided to children and young people and their families, that improves the quality and consistency of practice.
  - The launch of a 'refer a friend' scheme in March 2020 has resulted in a further 3 experienced social workers joining the service.
  - Regular engagement with agency staff to consider applying for vacancies within the service has resulted in a number of agency social workers being appointed to permanent experienced social worker roles.
  - Children's Services launched their own local Induction in October 2020 to support the corporate Induction. This is held on a monthly basis.
- 6.3 The service is under significant pressure, the current market and demand for social workers continues to increase due to the pandemic which has increased the competition for recruiting within the region. The number of social work vacancies remains high, and despite a range of recruitment initiatives and other approaches, the service continues to interview small numbers of candidates on a weekly basis and those successful are offered experienced social worker roles.
- 6.4 The COVID-19 pandemic is having significant impact on recruitment and is making it difficult to recruit experienced social workers during this period. This has led to an increased use of agency staff and increased financial impact. The service has also experienced difficulty in recruiting agency social workers due to insufficient experienced social workers in the region.

A shortage of social workers has led to higher caseloads and higher demand of work across all services and teams in Children's Services.

- 6.5 A further 12 Newly Qualified Social Workers (Cohort 7) will commence on 25 January 2021, this is an additional cohort to address further the number of social work vacancies within the service. A further Social Work Academy Team to manage the double cohorts of Newly Qualified Social Workers will also be established and recruited to.
- 6.6 Children's Services continue to work with the recruitment team and human resource colleagues to review further targeted campaigns and innovative ways to recruit and retain experienced social workers. A presentation from corporate colleagues to support the work required on driving the workforce forward was presented by the Director of Human Resources at the Continuous Improvement Executive Group on 9<sup>th</sup> December.
- 6.7 The presentation outlined the work undertaken by the recruitment team, the quality and offer is improving, feedback is positive from candidates and the transition into virtual interviews is also good. Recruitment and retention initiatives will be explored further by the workforce operational group to identify how the service can work differently and be more creative to encourage further experienced social workers to apply for vacancies and to retain existing staff.

## **7 Performance Progress**

- 7.1 The Performance Board continues to meet monthly to review performance. A summary of current performance shows there continues to be an increase in performance activity, the increase in demand is putting significant pressure on services.
  - Increase in Referrals in the last seven months (**613** compared with 279 in April 2020)
  - Contacts in the last seven months (**2,392** compared with 1582 April 2020)
  - Number of children subject to a child protection plan have increased to **462** compared with 408 in April 2020
  - S47's has increased considerably **307** in October 2020 compared with 110 in April 2020.
  - Children in Need continue to rise **2010** compared with 1225 in April 2020
  - Looked after children continue to increase **756** compared with 693 in April.
  - Assessments completed within 45 days have decreased to **78.3%** compared with 85.9% in April 2020.

## **8 Quality Assurance Visit**

- 8.1 Children's Services introduced Quality Assurance visits to teams in October 2019. The aim is to ensure understanding of practice and the signs of safety framework to ensure a clearer line of sight of the senior leadership team to frontline practitioners. The visits include direct observations, discussions with staff, and case mapping. The first visit was held in the West Area Social work team in October 2019. The second visit was held in the Throughcare team in January 2020. The Lead Member, and the Senior Leadership team attended the visit.
- 8.2 Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, visits have not been undertaken during March-September 2020. In October 2020 the third visit was held in the MASH, this was face to face whilst complying with COVID-19 guidance with some of the visit completed remotely.
- 8.3 The MASH Quality assurance visit focused on: Threshold decisions; Consent (Parental Responsibility Holder); Partner Agency Contribution; Referral Quality and Outcomes; Strategy Meetings; Referral Outcome correspondence and management oversight. The findings from the visit highlighted positive outcomes with evidence demonstrating improvement and focus on maintaining continuous improvement.

## **9 Overall Summary**

- 9.1 The service continues to experience significant pressures with the increase in demand as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It remains a very challenging operating environment.
- 9.2 In the lead up to the Ofsted Interim Focused visit the Children's senior leadership team and extended Leadership Team continue to work together to drive forward practice improvements and service changes. This phase of significant demand and improvement relies heavily on corporate support and the support from partners to ensure that improvement continues. There is explicit intention to ensure that Children's Services reaches a position where it is continuously achieving good outcomes for the Children of Coventry.

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