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

11 March 2021

Subject: Children's Services Continuous Improvement Progress

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 10 February 2021.

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 6th - 30th March 2017, the outcome of the inspection was published on 13th 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 21st March 2019.
- 3.7 The Ofsted Annual Conversation with regional representatives is undertaken each year, the meeting last year took place in March 2020. This year, the meeting will be held in April 2021.
- 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 28th October 2020. The new arrangements will be effective from 1st 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 and signed off as completed by the Executive Group board members on 10 February 2021.
- 4.2 The oversight of continuous improvement will be transferred to Coventry Safeguarding Children's Partnership on 1 April 2021, the governance arrangements agreed will ensure that regular reporting on Children's Service continuous improvement is reported to Senior Managers and elected members on a regular basis. Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board will receive quarterly reports in future.
- 4.3 Executive Group members highlighted the significant improvements over the last seven years and acknowledged their thanks and appreciation to the Independent Chair for his experience and expertise in steering the improvement journey forward over the last five years. The service will get to 'good' and the continuous improvement journey will continue and be reported via the Coventry Safeguarding and Children's Partnership.
- 4.4 A refreshed Strategic Plan for 2021-2023 is being developed and will include the priorities and continuous improvement actions to be taken forward.

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 services have continued to operate during the lockdown period. Area Teams and Family Hubs have remained open and have bubble teams and duty staff kept to a minimum at all times with remote homeworking used where possible.

- 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 Risk assessments continue to be updated to reflect the changes in government guidance: staff are encouraged to take the Lateral Flow tests weekly and staff who meet the criteria in the Standard Operating Procedure for vaccinations are being offered a vaccine.
- 5.5 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 continues to be a challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a 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.
- 6.2 The service continues to undertake exit interviews to understand why social workers leave.
- 6.3 Children's Services has successfully appointed an additional cohort of 9 Newly Qualified Social Workers (Cohort 7) who commenced on 25th January 2021. The Social Work Academy will manage a staggered cohort of NQSW's with an additional team to reduce the number of vacancies.
- 6.4 Coventry's Return to Practice (RTP) Programme relaunched in December, six successful candidates have been offered a shadowing opportunity to update their practice in a specific team and ultimately be offered a permanent opportunity to practice as a Children's Social Worker in Coventry.
- 6.5 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.

7 Performance Progress

- 7.1 The Performance Board continues to meet monthly to review Children's Services performance.
- 7.2 Performance activity has reduced slightly compared with the peak reached in October 2020, although numbers remain higher than a year ago. The impact of the new lockdown is likely to have a further impact on performance and see increased activity, as in the lockdown in March 2020.
- 7.3 There has been a slight increase in Contacts and Child Protection Plans and Looked After Children compared to the previous month, while referrals, Section 47 enquiries, Children in Need reduced slightly in comparison to last month.
- 7.4 The annual Performance Workshop held in February reviewed the current performance targets and measures and agreed the new targets and measures for 2021/22. The Performance Board will continue to monitor performance monthly and report progress to the Coventry Safeguarding Children's Partnership on a quarterly basis.

8 Leeds Family Valued Programme

- 8.1 Family Valued is a Leeds City Council system change programme designed to spread restorative practice across children's services. A key element is the expansion of the Family

Group Conferencing (FGC) service to a scale not previously seen in the UK, including for families experiencing domestic violence.

- 8.2 Coventry wants all children and young people in the authority to achieve the best possible outcomes. The pressure of numbers of children looked after, lack of local placement availability, has made it challenging to the service. The opportunity that Family Valued brings is significant and will strengthen Children's Services.
- 8.3 The cost to implement the Leeds Family Valued programme for the first two years will be met fully by the Department for Education.
- 8.4 A Cabinet Report on this matter will be considered by the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board at their meeting on 11th March 2021 with recommendations to monitor implementation of the programme.

9 Ofsted Interim Focused Visit and the Annual Ofsted Conversation

- 9.1 Following the suspension of routine inspections in March 2020 due to COVID-19, Ofsted outlined their interim plans for a phased return to routine inspections. The interim arrangements commenced in late September 2020. As a result of the lockdown in November 2020, visits were paused further.
- 9.2 In January 2021, Ofsted announced that following the national lockdown position – interim focused visits would re-commence from February 2021 onwards. It is likely that visits will be virtual. Coventry are anticipating an interim focused visit very soon.
- 9.3 Ofsted have confirmed that the annual Ofsted conversation will be held in April 2021. The Self-assessment is currently being updated to reflect the current position.

10 Overall Summary

- 10.1 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 within the national lockdown position. Staff continue to be encouraged to take the Lateral Flow tests weekly and priority frontline social care staff are being offered the vaccine.
- 10.2 Coventry is on a journey to good or better and is committed to achieving this. Working with and alongside Leeds Local Authority will enhance the pace of change and further improve outcomes for children in Coventry.
- 10.3 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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