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

17 March 2022

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 journey over the last twelve months.

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 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.
- 3.3 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.
- 3.4 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 to reflect the COVID-19 context for a phased return to routine inspections which commenced from September 2020. The interim visits were paused again during the November 2020 lockdown.
- 3.5 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 an annual basis.

- 3.6 On 5 January 2021 a further national lockdown was announced. Ofsted confirmed that interim assurance focused visits will be undertaken during the national lockdown period commencing from February 2021.
- 3.7 The interim focused visit, (COVID-19 assurance) was undertaken on 12 and 13 May 2021. Interim focused visit differs from the usual focused visits in that they have a broader scope with a particular focus on the quality of decision making for children. The letter confirming the outcome was published on 25th June 2021. Three areas were identified for improvement.
- 3.8 Children's Services is likely to be re-inspected by Ofsted (Standard ILACS) Inspection in 2022.
- 3.9 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.

4 Children's Services Continuous Improvement Progress

- 4.1 The Children's Services Strategic Plan and Journey to Excellence September 2019-September 2022 outlines the improvement journey and the significant progress achieved working with partners to improve practice, sustain the workforce, reduce reliance on agency staff, in delivering service changes.
- 4.2 The service continues to work closely with its partners to focus on achieving good outcomes for our children. The overarching strategic priorities include a sustainable workforce, improving the quality of front-line practice and partnership working.
- 4.3 The Children's Services Strategic Plan will be refreshed in April 2022, embedding Coventry Family Valued relational restorative work with children and families and highlighting the significant progress against continuous improvement /transformation service changes and the aspirations for the future.

5 Children's Services COVID-19 journey

- 5.1 The impact of COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenging time and has had a significant impact on how services are delivered. Children's Services staff have adapted swiftly and effectively to the changes required in the way the service work. The service has remained committed to working with children and families, which has enabled the service to ensure that the most vulnerable children have been seen in person, and that children in care, both living in Coventry and outside the city, are provided with the technology and access to tuition and education where possible. Partnership working in Coventry has strengthened during the pandemic, with partners working together to focus and maintain their oversight of children's safety and well-being
- 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 The development of students has been impacted by the pandemic with lectures being online, placements being virtual and NQSW's not receiving the same levels of interaction and learning with families prior to the pandemic. The Social Work Academy recognised the impact of the pandemic of Newly Qualified Social Workers and responded with additional workshops with a detailed focus around undertaking home visits, assessment skills and

analysis skills alongside additional support on visits to families, and additional mentoring discussions

- 5.5 Children's Services ensured all workers received a health discussion to identify any existing vulnerabilities which may link to Covid-19, with individual plans in place where vulnerabilities were identified. Where children and families were isolating or infected with Covid-19, risk assessments were undertaken with a balanced focus on children's safety, wellbeing alongside workers health and safety needs.
- 5.6 During the pandemic there has been a push for self-care and a focus on health and fitness, this has brought yoga sessions, mindfulness and digital team fitness activities through Kaido challenges. The monthly Practice Development Forum for managers and practitioners in children's services dedicates a regular slot to wellbeing activities and encourages a culture of self-care Children's Services have also participated in their own a wellbeing week which took place in November 2021, both which received very positive feedback on the activities arranged and is helping to support staff to manage their own emotional wellbeing and better support their team. Further wellbeing events are being planned for 2022.
- 5.7 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. Recruiting to experienced social worker vacancies remain a significant challenge.

6 Workforce

- 6.1 The challenge for Coventry is the competitive market for social workers within the West Midlands region. The workforce profile over the past few years has led to children's services supporting a "grow our own" approach, with a key focus on enabling social workers into the profession, and the growth into experienced social workers with high quality practice standards. This includes working with a variety of pre-qualifying routes into social work including Frontline, Step up to Social Work and Social Work Degree Apprenticeships, investing in these routes and these students has effectively supported Social Workers into the profession and into Coventry. These schemes are aligned to the Social Work Academy, where once qualified these Newly Qualified Social workers are supported through their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment and to make the transition from students into professional and statutory practice.
- 6.2 The Coventry Social Work Academy is an operational team where cohorts of Newly Qualified Social Workers benefit from learning and development workshops, alongside robust oversight of work with children and families, in a protected environment to establish best practice as a baseline for continuous professional development journey. After the first 6 months of joining the Social Work Academy, newly qualified social workers continue on their assessed and supported year in employment in the wider children's services, with long arm support from the Social Work Academy.
- 6.3 The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the stability of the workforce, social worker vacancies have remained high during the last year and good agency staff have been in short supply. Children's Services require agency social workers to maintain operational statutory services and to ensure caseloads remain manageable across the teams. Agency cover continues to be required to address vacancies, sickness and maternity leave cover. Since the summer, the service has seen a reduction in agency staffing to 61 in January 2022 compared with 83 in July 2021, this is a result of robust monitoring and recruitment strategies to increase the number of newly qualified social workers commencing employment to reduce the number of vacancies.
- 6.4 The expansion of the Social Work Academy has contributed to the building of a stable and permanent workforce. Work continues with agency permanent suppliers to encourage agency staff to convert to permanent roles. Recruitment webinars and advertising on

social media platforms and other initiatives such as international recruitment continue to be explored to recruit experienced social workers.

- 6.5 As a result of the positive strategies in place to recruit social workers, the number of social worker vacancies is reducing, which is having a positive impact and reduction in agency cover.

7 Coventry House Project

- 7.1 The Coventry House Project was launched in July 2021. The project helps young people to transition into independence and is a partnership project with Citizen housing in Coventry. The project creates a peer community for young people and enables them to develop the practical and emotional skills that they need to live independently. They work on houses which become their homes to live in for as long as they want.
- 7.2 The House Project lead launched the project with key partners including, Independent Reviewing Officers, Social Work teams, Placements team, Health, Education providers, Virtual School, Police. This was completed by attending team/service meetings and one to one discussion. The House Project practitioners are committed to ensure all agencies are aware of the project and joint work.
- 7.3 The potential cohort of young people for the project was identified prior to the launch taking place. The identification involved discussion with the allocated social workers, IRO's and consideration of the young person's care plan. The placement mix was also a consideration. The Coventry House Project launch was held in July 2021, the 12 young people who signed up to the project are making good progress developing relationships and creating a peer community to develop the practical and emotional skills that they need to live independently.
- 7.4 The young people on the project have named their cohort '*HP Sunrise - Our Journey to independence*'. They have developed their own logo for the cohort. The young people have created a community within their group and have formed friendships. They regularly cook and eat together during their group sessions and when asked what they like most about the project, they refer to it as their family.
- 7.5 10 of the young people have had the opportunity to go into the training flat for 1 week. This was a success, and the experience provided the young people with the opportunity to engage with the independence and learning plan module. It also provided an opportunity to assess and understand any worries for the young people around independent living and help the House Project facilitators to target their work. The first young person went into the flat on 4th October 2021 and the remainder of the cohort went in concurrently for the following 9 weeks.
- 7.6 The partnership working with Valpak has been a strength of the project and will seek to build on this for future cohorts.
- 7.7 The Coventry House Project has a twitter page which is very child and young person focused and provides regular updates on progress of the project. All the practitioners and young people on the project are loud and proud of it and want to build on this.

8 Coventry 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. The programme launched in April 2021.
- 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 Coventry Family Valued programme for the first two years is met fully by the Department for Education.
- 8.4 35 FTE Family Valued posts have been recruited to, to deliver and embed the relational restorative practice across the service working with children and families and partners.
- 8.5 As part of the partnership with Leeds, Restorative Practice Awareness Training is being rolled out across Children's Services and partner agencies. Between July and December 2021, **517 practitioners** have attended this training, with the aim that all Children's Services staff will have attended this training by the end of March 2022. This training enhances the existing Signs of Safety training, which is offered, and over the next year, this training is being reviewed, with aspirations to offer training which focusses on The Coventry Way moving forward. This training commitment will include bespoke workshops which focus on specific elements of Signs of Safety, ensuring that we are practicing *with* and not doing *to* or *for* families
- 8.6 In addition to the Restorative Practice Awareness training, Team Managers are undertaking management oversight and supervision training. The Leadership team are undertaking a Strategic Leadership core programme, Operational Leaders are undertaking Relational middle leadership training, and actin learning sets.
- 8.7 Family Valued focuses on restorative and relationship-based practice- and how this leads to better outcomes for children and families. 'The Coventry Way' is the new practice approach with Signs of Safety is what we do, and Restorative and Relationship based practice is how we do it. The Restorative Practice Leads are working with teams to support and embed this way of working into practice.
- 8.8 The Family Valued Implementation is made up of nine workstreams:
 - Sustainability, Finance and Performance
 - Embedding Relationship-Based Practice
 - Expansion of Family Group Conferencing and New Restorative Services
 - Front Door
 - Domestic Abuse
 - Contextual Safeguarding/ Harm Outside of the Home
 - Promoting Connected Persons and Permanence through Special Guardianship Orders
 - Reunification Project
 - Voice and Influence
- 8.9 The Reunification workstream is demonstrating impact, six of the eleven children, who the Throughcare strand of the project are working with, have now returned home. The Reunification Social Worker for the Looked After Children and Permanence strand of the project has been in post since October 2021 and is currently working with nine children and their families. Due to the success of this project, consideration is being given to whether an expansion of the team would maximise the number of children who can safely return to their families.
- 8.10 In November 2021, a trail for co-location arrangements for FGC Coordinators commenced, in one of the Help and Protection areas, early indication is that the data suggests some increased use of FGC's, this is likely to be demonstrated further once the Pre-initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) Pathway is confirmed.
- 8.11 A review of the front door was undertaken in September 2021, the service is working with Leeds colleagues to finalise an action plan for further development.

- 8.12 A turning the Curve event is planned in March 2022, a partnership event to consider how Children's Services can work differently to improve outcomes for children and families in Coventry.
- 8.13 To celebrate the first anniversary of the Coventry Family Valued programme, a celebration event is being arranged between 4-8 April 2022 to celebrate the progress from each of the Workstreams 1 year on and an opportunity to re-engage in preparation for the next 12 months.

9 Ofsted Areas for Improvement Action Plan

- 9.1 The interim focused visit (COVID-19 Assurance) was undertaken on 12 and 13 May 2021, the two day visit was carried out by Four Her Majesty's Inspectors and one schools HMI.
- 9.2 Three areas were identified as areas for improvement:
- The timeliness of decision making for children to enter the Public Law Outline (PLO), and their circumstances being purposefully progressed once within it.
 - The quality of supervision, management oversight and case notes so that the rationale for decisions, made is clearly recorded.
 - Decision making and the recording of rationale with respect of children's placements
- 9.3 An Action Plan was developed in response to the visit. The plan details the progress against the areas for development.

10 Overall Summary

- 10.1 Coventry has a positive story to tell, the Director of Children's Services is passionate about improving services for children; with strong, timely and effective political and corporate support; with a strong leadership team working with partners to drive improvements and work with families to embed Coventry Family Valued in Coventry.
- 10.2 Coventry wants all children and young people in the city 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. Embedding Coventry Family Valued is significant to our improvement and the impact and opportunities it brings will strengthen Children's Services.
- 10.3 In the lead up to the Ofsted Inspection, the Children's Services Leadership team and extended Leadership team continue to work together to drive forward practice improvements and services changes. 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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