

# CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



Report subject	<b>Improvement Journey – progress update</b>
Meeting date	8 June 2021
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	Members received an overview report of progress at their last meeting on 29 <sup>th</sup> March and requested to see the performance information which substantiated the progress being made. Two performance-related documents are therefore attached which confirm the trajectory of improvement which has been maintained since the March committee.
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>That Members note and scrutinise the performance documents so that any points and suggestions can be built into the next stage of the improvement journey</b>
Reason for recommendations	Request by the committee

Portfolio Holder(s):	Councillor Mike White, Lead Member for Children and Families
	Elaine Redding, Corporate Director of Children's Services and Anthony Douglas, DfE improvement Advisor for BCP
Report Authors	Elaine Redding and Anthony Douglas
Wards	All
Classification	For recommendations going forward

## **PROGRESS**

1. The Children's Services Action Plan was put together after a critical focused visit by Ofsted in October 2021. This has been reported to members previously. The Action Plan has been intensively monitored for delivery and shows improvements in all fifteen areas of the Plan. Position statements by each of the Accountable Officers for the fifteen actions are attached as Appendix 1. As can be seen, solid progress is being made. Accountable Officers are summoned to 'Holding to Account' meetings on a regular basis, to run through their particular area of the action plan.
2. Also attached at Appendix 2 is the latest data for the Department's Key Performance Obsessions. These are the most important aspects of performance which need transformation.
3. We are confident these improvements are real. As the sixth position statement shows, audits confirm this level of improvement. We also sought a second audit opinion from an experienced external auditor who confirmed the levels we have reached.
4. The framework for driving through improvement has remained in place throughout the last 6 months, such as a maturing leadership team, holding to account meetings and coherent crisis management. Some practice on individual cases in a crisis has been good to outstanding. Political commitment has been unwavering and clearly focused. Corporate contributions to improvement have been stepped up. However, some services remain in need of transformation, particularly as far as the experience of children, young people and their families are concerned and also some partner agencies like schools, who too often feel unsupported when they ask

for multi-agency help. The DCS and her leadership team understand the gaps and are working hard to bridge them.

5. The impact of the pandemic continues to be felt. Referrals have increased, in particular for mental health and domestic abuse. The new Domestic Abuse Act became law on 29<sup>th</sup> April. Included within the Bill is an important new clause that acknowledges that a child who sees, hears or experiences the effects of domestic abuse, and who is related to the person being abused or the perpetrator is also to be regarded as a victim of domestic abuse. Children must no longer be viewed as bystanders of domestic abuse, but as victims in their own right. This makes child-focused assessments of domestic abuse even more important as the criteria for an assessment will include child impact and not only analysis of the severity of an abusive incident through the eyes of the adult victim. This is an example of an adjustment to every day practice that has to be built into the improvement programme.
6. Progress in service delivery is considerable and tangible. It has been made up of thousands of small contributions by hundreds of individuals working to a clear set of aims and objectives. An example is the development work to identify long-term secure housing options for over 40 care leavers. Reaching this point has required the active involvement of senior leaders, middle management specialists and front-line practitioners, often in more than one agency. Each area of the action plan has needed a range of teams to work together effectively. We are pleased about the level of commitment and skill being shown.
7. BCP is not alone in requiring an improvement journey. All other local operational partners are on their own improvement journeys, albeit from different starting points. This indicates the significant pressures and demands all agencies are feeling and the need for them to change to stand still. The delivery of day to day demands at the same time as the requirement to improve is invariably challenging. This emphasises the need to develop agile and responsive services because they often have to be deployed onto changed or immediate priorities at short notice.

## **NEXT STEPS**

8. We are emphasising the need for stability in Children's Social Care Services, after the excessive churn of staff in management and on the front line since LGR. The recent improvement in recruitment and retention numbers is positive yet fragile. Too many staff and partner agencies, in schools for example, feel and experience a long-term frustration because their points of

contact in Children's Ser are constantly changing. The DCS has rightly emphasised the need for stability now rather than to undergo further upheaval. A hallmark of a 'good to outstanding' service is stability of leadership – as well as stability of culture and a stable direction. These are 3 pillars of stability that need to be built up strongly and sustainably in the coming months.

9. A new Children's Services Toolbox is being launched throughout the service, setting out in detail how the services work and fit together. Best practice is highlighted in each section. This development has been a co-production with staff and is the better for it. So far, children's social care has been covered. The first update, due in July, will concentrate on education services. The toolbox is intended to directly support and influence higher standards. Take-up will be monitored and measured.
  
10. The needs of the Childrens Services Improvement Journey need to be synchronised with the needs of the corporate Smarter Structures programme so that no barriers to improvement are unwittingly erected. Corporate Directors are working together to problem-solve where issues or difficulties arise.
  
11. An appreciative inquiry is under way into inclusion practices in BCP schools and colleges. This work directly supports the improvement agenda as some changes are needed to ensure children on the edge of being excluded receive multi-agency help at the earliest possible stage. Some schools have faultless inclusion practice whilst others need more support in our opinion to take every possible step to keep a child safely in their school. This work will complete in June and will be submitted to O and S and Cabinet when the conclusions and recommendations have been talked through with all of those directly affected.

### **Summary of financial implications**

12. Funding has been set aside in the current financial year for all areas in the Action Plan. A business case for additional funding to build up important functions like quality assurance and to buy in specialist training programmes is being discussed with DfE as part of the Department for Education's support for BCP post-LGR. Whilst there are no guarantees, some extra funding between the coming autumn and March 2023 is possible. The wider context is that all the relevant Children's Services budgets are under long-term pressure, especially the Higher Needs Funding Block which is now being scrutinised by the High Needs Block Recovery Board.

### **Summary of legal implications**

13. None arising from this report.

### **Summary of public health implications**

14. None arising directly from this report though improvements in all front-line services like children's services can have a positive public health impact. An example is reductions in abuse and neglect.

### **Summary of equality implications**

15. Improved children's services make a positive impact to inclusion, equality and diversity by supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable individuals and their families and preventing or limiting their adverse experiences. However, more needs to be done to review the impact of services on vulnerable groups such as BAME individuals, women and girls (in relation to violence) and children with disabilities, some of whom are waiting too long for a service. Most services making a difference to vulnerable individuals are multi-agency services so a major part of the improvement journey in children's services is to build strong external partnerships, in services like the Team Around the School and in child exploitation work with the objective of disrupting County Lines activity.

### **Summary of risk assessment**

16. The major risks facing children's services are intrinsic risks to all such services across the country and wider. This is when services to individual children fail to protect them or when whole services are compromised because of a systemic failure or failures. The risks associated with the Action Plan and improvement journey are that progress is not quick enough or not made at all in a key area. At present, the risks of this are assessed as low. The Improvement Board reviews a short risk register at each of its meetings.

### **Background papers**

17. None

### **Appendices**

1. Position statements about areas of the action plan
2. Key performance obsessions, March 2021

