

# Cabinet

## 8 December 2020

### Annual Self-Evaluation of Children's Services

#### For Decision

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr A Parry, Children, Education, Skills and Early Help

**Local Councillor(s):** N/A

**Executive Director:** T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children

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**Report Status:** Public

#### **Recommendation:**

Members of the Cabinet are asked to consider and note the contents of the Annual Self-Evaluation of Children's Services.

#### **Reason for Recommendation:**

The production of an Annual Self Evaluation as part of the Ofsted Inspection Framework of Children's Services. This report is intended to enable political leaders to understand areas of strength and areas for development.

#### **1. Executive Summary**

This report is a comprehensive self-evaluation of children's services to support preparation for the Ofsted inspection of services for children need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.

The report provides an overview of the areas of strength and areas for development of Children's Services focusing on:

- leadership and governance
- our response to Covid-19
- the quality and impact of social work practice
- education and inclusion

- our approach to performance management and quality assurance
- our future plans for continuing to strengthen services

## 2. Financial Implications

N/A

## 3. Well-being and Health Implications

Good quality children's services lay the foundations for essential for health and wellbeing of children, young people and families.

## 4. Climate implications

N/A

## 5. Other Implications

## 6. Risk Assessment

Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

## 7. Equalities Impact Assessment

N/A

## 8. Appendices

Appendix 1: Annual Self-Evaluation

Appendix 2: Interim SEND Visit Findings

## 9. Background Papers

## 10. Introduction and Background

**10.1.** Local authority children's services are asked to produce and Annual Self-Evaluation for the inspection of services for children need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers as part of the [Ofsted framework for inspecting local authority children's services \(ILACS\)](#), first published in November 2017 and updated in August 2020.

**10.2.** Self-evaluation is a critical part of our quality assurance and enables leaders to identify areas of strength and areas of development. This document also provides the foundation for peer challenge, and Children's Services participates in an annual south west region peer challenge programme which provides additional support and challenge. This peer challenge event take place in December each year. As part of the South West Regional annual programme of sector-led improvement, it also provides an opportunity to

engage in peer challenge within the region; share good practice; and identify regional priorities and programmes of support for the coming year.

- 10.3. This report provides an overview of the key findings from the most recent self-evaluation with the full self-evaluation attached as Appendix 1. Additionally, the report provides a summary of the findings of the recent SEND Interim Visit (Oct 2020), with the letter from Ofsted and CQC provided as Appendix 2.

## **11. Leadership and governance**

- 11.1. There is strong sense of corporate responsibility for children and young people with the Chief Executive, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children's Services (Lead Member for Children's Services) and supporting Lead Members creating a culture where the needs of children and families are prioritised. The council senior Executive Leadership team are active contributors in strategic partnerships and planning for children, young people and their families. The Deputy Leader of the Council is the Chair of the Strategic Alliance Board (also attended by the Portfolio Holder and supporting Lead Members) the Chief Executive is the Co-Chair of the Strengthening Services Board which is also attended by the Portfolio Holders for both Children's and Adults' Services.
- 11.2. There is strong partnership commitment to children, young people and families in Dorset, evidenced through the partnership commitment to the delivery of a new Children, Young People and Families Plan overseen by the Strategic Alliance Board and the development a new whole system improvement programme to strengthen our services for vulnerable children and their families, overseen by our Strengthening Services Board.
- 11.3. Our new integrated locality model – Dorset Children Thrive is providing the framework for the delivery of more joined up services and beginning to improve the experiences of our children, young people and families.
- 11.4. Our social work workforce is becoming more stable with successful recruitment programmes in place and reducing caseloads and we are working hard to improve sickness levels in the service. Our workforce development group are overseeing these improvements and the appointment of a Principal Social worker is a welcome addition to improving the quality of social work practice.

## **12. Our response to Covid-19**

- 12.1. Recent months have seen our partnership grow from strength to strength, coming together to support children and their families in our communities, the partnership mobilised, responded quickly, demonstrated agility and most importantly lived a one team, one Dorset, approach. During the Covid period there have been over 300 pieces of guidance and policy changes that have an impact on children's services requiring a response.
- 12.2. During Covid-19, services have been given greater authority to share information to better identify and support families with needs resulting in new ways of working, increased agility in the workforce and more timely and co-

ordinated interventions. We have sought, throughout this period to keep listening to the experiences of our children, young people and families through the creation of regular foster carer forums, young people forums, formal and informal view seeking. Practice observation has continued, and following a brief break, we have recommenced our auditing process.

### **13. Quality and Impact of social work practice**

#### **13.1. Integrated front door**

- (i) The integrated front door for children's services includes an advice and duty desk (CHAD), a multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and an Early Help Hub. We are seeing a positive impact of these new arrangements with contact and referrals being directed to the right services at the right time to ensure a proportionate response in a timely way. Audit indicates that safeguarding decisions are well informed and response are timely and the rate of referrals leading to a social work assessment have reduced to be in line with our statistical neighbours.
- (ii) We are working more closely with the police to improve the effectiveness of information sharing and contacts at the front-door and have an improved triage in place which is improving the quality of information sharing. Whilst there has not been a sustained period of stability to enable comparable figures over the last 6 months due to the Covid 19, there is evidence that the changes made to date have had a positive impact on the decision making for children and we will continue to evaluate.

#### **13.2. Early Help**

- (i) This remains an intrinsic part of our new model – Dorset Children Thrive. Our new model has increased the council's capacity for early help and SEN support by both increasing the number of frontline practitioners and delivering closer integration of these practitioners to ensure timely assessment and improve our graduated response for children and their families. Furthermore, we are expanding our support to schools and settings through dedicated teams, providing contact points of expertise to our education colleagues. This enables us to build on our established model of proactive support for children, enabling us to wrap around the communities children are part of.
- (ii) We have delivered 100% of our target for the national Troubled Families Programme. We will continue to focus on improving timeliness of response, recording practice and quality of planning.

#### **13.3. Children in Need**

- (i) Our Child in Need (CIN) numbers are gradually decreasing and are in line with our statistical neighbours (292 per 10,000). Our CIN assessments are also reducing as a result of work taking place in the ChAD and ongoing work to embed Early Help. There has been significant improvement in the last four months in timeliness of our social work assessments and our social workers direct work and contact with children and families is a high priority for us.

- (ii) We continue to work to ensure consistency in the quality of our assessments and are improving practice through the delivery of the Strengthening Services Programme.

#### **13.4. Child Protection**

- (i) Although we have seen an increase in the numbers of children involved in child protection processes, we have seen a significant improvement in the timeliness of our child protection conferences and continue to monitor this closely. Partnership engagement is good and we are working on a new conferencing model which is a relationship based restorative model. We anticipate that this will support improved Child Protection Planning and ensure that the right children are on a Child Protection Plan for the right amount of time to achieve the best outcomes for them.
- (ii) Following a decline in the use of advocacy for child protection in Q4 2019/2020, a more proactive approach has been taken to ensure that children are able to access the service, which has resulted in over a 50% increase in referrals.
- (iii) We are closely monitoring our practice in this area to ensure that the right children are supported by child protection plans and that these are effective in meeting their needs alongside ensuring that our visits to families are timely and we are seeing more children alone.

#### **13.5. Children who are disabled**

- (i) We have a dedicated service for children who are disabled which is delivered by three social care teams, one Early Help team and an occupational therapist team and provide a residential provision for children at the Cherries.
- (ii) The reduction in access to school provision led to additional pressures on families and an increased reliance on services such as direct payments and short break provision leading to challenges for service providers in prioritising places and working with a reduced workforce of care workers. Improving the sufficiency of shorts breaks provision is a key priority for us moving forward.

#### **13.6. Domestic Abuse**

- (i) We have more to do to ensure our practitioners consistently identify different types of domestic abuse and to build on initial work to promote the range of Domestic Abuse Support services available in our area so that our staff are able to respond effectively with the right support for children and families.
- (ii) Through our Strengthening Services Plan we are working closely with the Community Safety Partnership on a range of actions to strengthen our partnership approach including the implementation of a Domestic Abuse Toolkit and increasing our range of interventions for perpetrators.

#### **13.7. Youth Offending**

- (i) The Youth Offending Service is a pan-Dorset partnership comprising Dorset Council, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council, NHS Dorset CCG, Dorset Police and the National Probation Service Dorset. The rate for first time

entrants has reduced after an increase in the period April –Mar 2020. While it is positive to see the rate returning to previous level, we remain ambitious to reduce this even further and enhance the tailored individual response to those children that do enter the justice system.

- (ii) We are working on additional options for informal responses to low level offending, such as Youth Restorative Disposals, so that young people are not criminalised unnecessarily.

### **13.8. Children in Care**

- (i) We have seen an increase in the number of children in our care (485); 71 per 10,000 currently compared to 54 per 10,000 in 2018/19 when we were in line with our statistical neighbours. While new entrants to care remain fewer in number than last year, we know that children who enter remain in our care for longer.
- (ii) We have strengthened our approach to decrease the number of children entering care in an unplanned way by improved line of sight and analysis of crisis entry to care in the weekly Locality Line of Sight Meetings. Despite the challenges of the pandemic in maintaining face to face contact, we have been making sure that we continue, wherever possible to keep in touch with and visit our children in care. Our social workers are using technology to stay in touch, and we are working closely with foster carers and placement providers to safely visit in a Covid secure way and reducing unnecessary footfall where possible by coordinating visits by professionals.
- (iii) Overall, our practice in ensuring we understand the health needs of children entering our care is improving, with improvements in timeliness of gaining consent for Initial Health Assessments as a result of increased management oversight and weekly monitoring, however we have more work to do to ensure we understand and address the emotional wellbeing and mental health needs of the children in our care. The mental health pathway is currently being reviewed and an early intervention emotional wellbeing pathway is being developed
- (iv) We have improved our performance in ensuring all children in care have a Permanence Plan. From a low baseline earlier in the year, 85% of children now have a permanence plan and attention is being paid to strengthen quality and reduce the number of children where there is drift in achieving permanence. Placement stability is improving but there is more to do in enabling our children to achieve permanence earlier and ensuring that stability is maintained
- (v) We still have too many children placed away from their local areas and so recruiting local carers for our children is central to our Sufficiency Strategy and are moving at pace to increase the volume, range and type of care provision in the county through focusing on foster-care and residential provision.
- (vi) Going forward will see the strengthening of our work with children and families through the embedding of multi-disciplinary teams providing early support to families to reduce the need for children to come into care. Our work with older children will be strengthened through the introduction of the Harbour

Adolescent Service providing intensive support through Targeted Youth Work (Contextual Safeguarding). We have secured capital investment to progress this work and are working closely with North Yorkshire who have successfully implemented this model.

- (vii) There has been a reduction in the numbers of our children in care having a missing episode, however we know we have more to do to strengthen our work with all children who are reported missing to ensure they receive timely and quality interventions through Return Home Interviews and a new protocol with the police.

### **13.9. Adoption Services**

- (i) Adoption Services are provided through the Regional Adoption Agency (Aspire), which serves the Dorset Council and BCP Council areas. From 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020, 60 adoptive families were approved. The sufficiency target for the year was 50, based on placing 60 children a year for whom adoption is the plan. A review is being undertaken with Aspire to fully consider impact and outcomes for children within the existing RAA to support future plans for service delivery. This will be completed by January 2021

### **13.10. Care Leavers**

- (i) We currently have 262 young people receiving leaving care services, and we know that this number will significantly increase by end of August 2021 with 91 of 16/17-year olds already present in our resident care group. Most of our young people (86%) remained in care until their 18th birthday. While this is an improving picture, we know not as many of our young people are benefiting from Staying Put arrangements as we would like
- (ii) Keeping in touch with our care leavers is a strength. While most of our care leavers are in accommodation that is deemed suitable, we need to do more to ensure all our care leavers have safe and stable accommodation that meets their needs. The availability of housing (both in the private sector and through our own housing allocation) and the impact of Covid-19 has made this work and we will be working with colleagues in Adults and Housing to improve this.
- (iii) We need to improve the work we are doing to support our care leavers to be in education, employment or training. All children in care and care leavers who apply for Dorset Council apprenticeships are guaranteed an interview, and the team have very recently collaborated with Dorset Council Highways and supported 3 care leavers to achieve an interview for a Highways apprenticeship.
- (iv) Our work with Coram Voice and the New Belongings programme provides a framework to be ambitious for our Care Leavers and develop a strong care leaver offer.

## **14. Education and Inclusion**

### **14.1. School Performance**

- (i) Three quarters of our schools (pre-Covid) were rated good or outstanding, lower than national figures. Attainment and progress in all key stages needs to improve. We are working closely with schools support our entire education ecosystem to strengthen school to school collaboration and the sharing of best practice. This will build on the positive work of our schools through the pandemic and the improved communication and collaboration with the local authority.

#### **14.2. Inclusion**

- (i) Fixed term and permanent exclusions increased over the 3 years period pre-Covid, but dropped during the Covid period. In our new locality model, we have inclusion leads who will work proactively with schools and young people, bringing staff and resource to seek to prevent exclusions through targeted work. A Multi-Agency Children Missing Out on Education and CME (CMOE) Action Group works together to meet the needs of our children and reduce the amount of time spent out of education.

#### **14.3. Children and young People with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)**

- (i) We have approximately 2,900 children with Special Educational Needs supported through an Educational, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and 6,700 children and young people identified with SEN Support needs. EHCPs in Dorset Council are increasingly produced within statutory timescales. Covid-19 has not resulted in a reduction in the number of requests for assessment and our team has worked hard to sustain performance despite the challenges we have faced.
- (ii) There is significant pressure on the High Needs Block funding in order to provide for the needs of children and young people with SEND and to address this are seeking to increase local special school provision, but also to support greater inclusion in mainstream schools. This is a key element of our Children, Young People and Families Plan.
- (iii) In October 2020, we received a joint visit from Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) focusing on the experiences of children and young people with SEND and their families (See Appendix 2). This was not an inspection, with findings being used to inform research at a national level. The inspectors heard that we worked well in partnership, were flexible in our response, learning and adjusting our responses as we learned more. Our emerging priorities include ensuring that our assessment of needs reflect the impact of the pandemic; co-production in our frontline practice and increasing the capacity and reach of overnight short break provision.

#### **14.4. The Virtual School**

- (i) Dorset Virtual School undertake three Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings a year for our children in care, one each term, in partnership with young people and their carers, social workers and the designated teachers in schools/settings. Schools and education providers are supportive of

strengthening our working towards greater early intervention to ensure that children and young people are supported at the earliest opportunity. The move to locality services will enable earlier identification of need, pooling the detailed knowledge of providers, education, early help and social care services in order to promote greater inclusion in schools for all our children in Dorset.

#### **14.5. Elective Home Education**

- (i) The number of Elective Home Education (EHE) young people has increased in recent years. Within our locality working we are reshaping our processes with these families to ensure that children are receiving a meaningful education. We are working closely with a group of parents to redefine our policy in this area in order to ensure that we have greater engagement with parents who choose to home educate.

### **15. Our approach to Performance Management and Quality Assurance**

#### **15.1. Performance Management**

- (i) We have a wealth of performance information available and are continuously improving and refining how we use our data and intelligence and have developed and implemented a new Performance Management Framework (PMF) that sits alongside our Quality Assurance Framework. Our monthly performance board provides an opportunity for support and challenge and key messages, alongside a dashboard of indicators are reported on a monthly basis to the Corporate Performance Board and Elected Members to ensure they have a strong line of sight to performance. We have undertaken significant work to develop our performance reporting and a new Performance and Impact Report to enable our Strengthening Services Board to monitor progress of our Strengthening Service Plan.
- (ii) Our Quality Assurance Framework was launched in October 2019 incorporating a collaborative audit approach that is undertaken by the operational managers within the service alongside our practitioners, addressing the area for development identified in the Ofsted focused visit in 2019. Our Principal Social Worker recently appointed following an absence of this post is driving quality of practice and keeping front line practice at the forefront of strategic improvements.
- (iii) Although we had a short auditing break when Covid first hit our audit compliance is strong with 95% return rate. Findings are identifying that most of our practice requires improvement to be good and we are considering a 'what good looks' like training approach to improve the quality of practice through our Advanced Practitioners.
- (iv) We work closely with our Complaints Team to ensure processes are followed in managing complaints for children and families. With their support, we have continued to strengthen our restorative approach to complaints, with a focus on improving relationships and establishing learning. We have developed an approach to measuring 'customer' satisfaction across services. For services

that have an end closure points and have seen a have seen a steady improvement on overall 'customer' satisfaction.

## **16. Future Plans**

- 16.1.** Our plans focus on improving the quality and availability of placements, responding to the pandemic and implementing our comprehensive multi-agency strengthening services plan alongside our new Children, Young People and Families Plan.

## **17. Recommendations**

- 17.1.** Members of the Cabinet are asked to consider and note the contents of the Annual Self-Evaluation of Children's Services.

**Footnote:**

Issues relating to financial, legal, environmental, economic and equalities implications have been considered and any information relevant to the decision is included within the report.