

Cabinet

18 May 2021

Self-Evaluation of Children's Services

February 2021

For Review and Consultation

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

Local Councillor(s):

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

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Report Status: Public

Recommendation:

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

Reason for Recommendation:

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

1. Executive Summary

This report provides a summary of the comprehensive self-evaluation of children's services to support preparation for the Ofsted inspection of services for children in 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

- the quality and impact of social work practice
- education and inclusion
- our approach to performance management and quality assurance
- our response to Covid-19
- our future plans for continuing to strengthen services

2. Financial Implications

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

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

There are no climate implications arising from this report.

5. Other Implications

N/A

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: Self-Evaluation for Inspection for Children in Need of Help and Protection, Children Looked After and Care Leavers

9. Background Papers

[Minutes of People and Health Scrutiny Committee - 20 April 2021](#)

10. Introduction and Background

- 10.1 Local authority children's services are asked to produce an Annual Self-Evaluation for the inspection of services for children in 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 March 2021.
- 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 takes 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 The Self-evaluation forms the basis of the Annual Engagement meeting with Ofsted that takes place as part of Ofsted's framework for inspection of local authority children's services.
- 10.4 This report provides an overview of headlines from the most recent Self-evaluation (February 2021) with the full self-evaluation attached as Appendix 1.

11. Key Strengths

- 11.1 During 2020/21 Children's Services have been focusing on building solid foundations, developing, and implementing robust strategic and partnership plans alongside partners. The Strengthening Services Plan brings together the work of the partnership to improve and strengthen services for vulnerable children into one whole system plan that sits alongside the partnership's Children, Young People and Families Plan 2020-23 which sets out how the partnership intends to improve long term outcomes for children and young people in Dorset. Together, the partnership is making substantial progress.
- 11.2 **Integrated Front Door arrangements** - During 2020/21 we have continued to build on the conversational model at the 'front door' by adding an Early Help Hub into our integrated front door and through developing and implementing improved MASH (Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub) arrangements with our partners. New arrangements are already making an impact – since implementation contacts and

referrals to children's social care have been in line with statistical neighbours and weekly auditing with Police and health indicates most decisions are well informed with timely response. Our re-referral rate over the last six months has reduced in comparison to previous years.

- 11.3 **Dorset Children Thrive model** – We have successfully implemented our model for delivering Children's Services in Dorset, which launched to schedule on the 1st September 2020. Our model has brought together Early Help, Children's Social Care, Educational Psychology, SEND (Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities) and Inclusion services under the leadership of Heads of Locality and Strategy into six integrated locality teams across Dorset. The teams are supported by a central team of specialist services. We are already seeing an impact of our new model with the green shoots of this visible to CQC and Ofsted inspectors during the SEND visit in October 2020. Our managers and staff tell us that our locality Line of Sight meetings and working closely with colleagues from other disciplines is having a positive impact on their work with families and is making a difference.
- 11.4 **Ambitious sufficiency programme for care places and SEND school places** – As part of our Children in Care Sufficiency of Placements Strategy we have secured commitment and support to an ambitious transformation programme that will see a range of additional provision developed for our children and young people in Dorset. The transformation programme is well underway and progressing well with additional provision on target to come on-line throughout 2021. In December 2020, a bold and ambitious SEND Sufficiency Strategy to develop approximately 500 additional specialist provision places for children and young people with SEND was approved.
- 11.5 **SEND Accelerated Progress Plan** – Dorset Council and its Local Area partners have worked relentlessly to deliver the SEND Accelerated Progress Plan and the necessary improvements required to SEND services in Dorset. This progress was recognised at the SEND Progress Review meeting with the Department for Education and NHS England advisers, the Department of Education wrote to us to confirm that they "are reassured that the strength and commitment of current leaders within the LA and CCG will continue improvements across the SEND system throughout Dorset. Based on the evidence provided, the Department and NHS England have concluded that you have demonstrated clear and sustained progress. This means that Dorset no longer requires formal monitoring of its SEND system." Dorset Council and partners are ambitious for our SEND children and young people and are continuing to build on the work we have done so far through our Children, Young People and Families Plan 2020-23.

- 11.6 **Improvement in planning for children entering care** – We have established robust Pre-proceedings arrangements ensuring that we are planning for children who may enter care much more effectively. Leadership Oversight meetings are embedded across our localities providing support and challenge to practitioners.
- 11.7 **Stability of staffing** - We have made quick progress in stabilising our staffing during 2020 and in reducing our staff turnover rate. In February 2020 we had a turnover rate for children’s services of 15% in February 2021 our year-to-date turnover rolling rate is 7%. Achievements include: Permanent Senior Leadership Team in place; Increased front line capacity; All social work team and service manager posts are permanently recruited to; Our Recruitment and Retention Strategy promoting Dorset as the employer of choice for social workers including overseas recruitment has delivered significant impact; Increase in permanent social workers - 151 Social Workers including ten new experienced Social Workers from South Africa who joined the team in November 2020 and a further 10 social workers in the recruitment pipeline. Furthermore, we are focused on succession planning and ‘growing our own’ we have trainee social workers who will qualify in the next year and expect further newly qualified social workers to join us in their Assessed and Supported Year of Learning (ASYE) too.
- 11.8 **Substantial decrease in caseloads** - The implementation of our locality Dorset Children Thrive model has impacted significantly on average social work caseloads which were reported as ranging from 9-14 in January 2021 in comparison to the average caseloads in February 2020 (between 23-29 at that point).

12. Areas for development

- 12.1 **Health of children in care** – We know that the health outcomes for our children in care are not good enough and are relentless in driving progress in this area. We are continuing to work with our partners to improve timeliness of health assessments, to ensure our children in care have up to date dental checks and immunisations. We are working to improve the completion of Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ), which is an important tool to help identify if children have emotional health and wellbeing needs, and urgent work is underway to ensure that all children who require an SDQ have one, and to implement our Policy and Practice Guidance and training for social workers, managers, foster carers, Virtual School staff, teachers, and health care professionals.
- 12.2 **Improving the level and efficacy of foster care placements** – We are determined to reduce the numbers of children in care that are placed out of Dorset and more than 20 miles away from home. As part of our

Sufficiency of Placements Strategy we have embarked on a programme of work that will build on our existing fostering service. This includes strengthening our Foster Carer Recruitment strategy, recruitment, and support of Complex Foster Carers, who are aligned to our new model The Harbour (inspired by North Yorkshire's No Wrong Door service) and optimising the capacity of current foster carers.

12.3 Diverting more children and young people from Child Protection Plans where appropriate – We have undertaken focused quality assurance work to review our child protection practice, we are working to embed relationship-based practice and that intervention with the family takes place at the lowest level of need. We are supporting front line managers in increased consistency of decision making, Team Managers now discuss the outcome of the Section 47 (child protection) enquiries with their Locality Quality Assurance and Reviewing Officers. Final sign off will now be with the Service Manager and where there remains a difference of opinion a reflective discussion will be had with the Quality Assurance Managers, who will also continue to regularly review practice in this area.

12.4 Improving inclusion across our schools – We have invested in building the capacity of our early intervention, inclusion, and outreach services to our schools. This has included deploying our specialist teachers, educational psychologists, and inclusion officers to support our schools in identifying needs and putting in place tools and strategies to support our mainstream settings. In addition, we work in partnership with our outstanding special schools to deploy their expertise into our mainstream settings through outreach. Through the deployment of our early identification and intervention strategies, we aim to reduce the likelihood that a child or young person will require specialist provision and improve outcomes through improved personalisation. This work will be monitored by our Best Education for All Steering Group which brings together Local Area partners and our Parent Carer Council to oversee our work to make sure that our schools and educational settings are supported to deliver the best education possible and that our children achieve their full potential.

13. Progress

13.1 Timeliness of Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs) - At our 2020 Annual Conversation with Ofsted we reported that timeliness of our Initial Child Protection Conferences was an area of concern for us with only 61% held on time (cumulative over 6 months). We undertook a review of process to understand the specific reasons for delay in ICPCs and as a result have implemented systems to monitor, track, chase and escalate performance. By May 2020 we were achieving 93% of Initial Child Protection Conferences within timescale. This performance has sustained

over time and current performance is 96% outperforming national and good and outstanding comparator averages.

13.2 Permanence Plans for children in care – At our Annual Conversation in February 2020 we reported we were focused on improving permanence for our children. We have continued this focus and through our Dorset Children Thrive structure implemented a new post of Service Manager for Corporate Parenting and Permanence. The Service Manager has been relentless in driving permanence for children, permanence tracking and monitoring arrangements which have embedded and have been supported by improved reporting from our electronic care record. Our Service Manager produces a monthly Line of Sight report highlighting exceptions and works with our operational managers. We have strengthened the role of Quality Assurance and Reviewing Officers (QAROs) to ensure they have a robust line of sight and are driving plans for children, they are also now attending Permanence Panels. At February 2021 97.1% of our Children in Care for 4 months or more have a completed permanence plan.

13.3 Registration of Children's Homes – This has been of critical importance to us, and we have worked hard, remaining in close contact with Ofsted to progress this. We have experienced issues with placing some of our children and young people who have the most complex needs, resulting in the use of a small number of unregistered provisions. Where this has been the case, there has been robust oversight of the placement, including enhanced visiting from social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers and Regulation 44 visits being undertaken (despite the absence of registration) and visits from our Executive Director. The outcomes described within these visits are reviewed by the Executive Director and Elected Member on a weekly basis, and a task and finish group is in place to ensure that we cease the use of any unregistered placements for children in care. We currently have no young people under 16 years of age in unregistered placements. We are moving at pace with our providers and politicians to address our sufficiency requirements.

14. Our response to Covid-19

14.1 During 2020 our partnership grew 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 had an impact on children's services and requiring a response.

14.2 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 recommenced our auditing process.

15. Next steps

Our plans for 2021/22 are to continue to focus on:

- Improving the quality and availability of placements
- Responding to the pandemic
- Implementing our comprehensive multi-agency Strengthening Services Plan, and addressing our areas for development, alongside our Children, Young People and Families Plan.

16. Recommendation:

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.