

Cabinet

28 March 2023

Children's Services – Annual Self-Evaluation

For Decision

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

Local Councillor(s): All

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

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Report Status: Public

Brief Summary: This report provides a summary of the comprehensive self-evaluation of Children's Services produced as part of the Ofsted Inspection Framework for the inspection of Local Authority Services for children in need of help and protection children looked after and care leavers. The self-evaluation focuses on leadership and governance, the quality and impact of social work practice, education and inclusion, our approach to performance management and quality assurance and future plans.

Recommendation: Cabinet are asked to review and consider the contents of the Annual Self-Evaluation of Children's Services 2023, noting the strengths, continuous improvement approach and next steps.

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 continuous improvement approach taken.

1. Introduction and Background

1.1 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 December 2022. It forms the basis of our Annual Engagement meeting with Ofsted which is a foundation of the inspection framework.

- 1.2 Self-evaluation is a critical part of our quality assurance and enables leaders to identify areas of strength and development. The Self-Evaluation is also used for our participation in the annual south-west region peer challenge programme, part of a regional sector led improvement programme. This peer challenge event takes place in December each year and provides an opportunity to share good practice and identify regional priorities and programmes of support for the coming year.
- 1.3 This report provides an overview of the headlines from the most recent Self-evaluation (February 2023) which is provided as Appendix 1.

2. **Our Strengths**

- 2.1 Our integrated front door arrangements including our Children's Advice and Duty Service (ChAD), multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and early help hub model continues to work well to ensure that families receive the right support at the right time. The ChAD team provides a calm, well-organised 'front door' to our services, making timely and appropriate decisions about how to protect and support children most effectively. Parental consent is obtained wherever appropriate, and families are not subjected to statutory intervention unnecessarily. However, when children are, or may be, at risk of significant harm, social workers investigate quickly, with the support of key partners (including the police) when needed.
- 2.2 Our 'Thrive' locality-based model continues to demonstrate that more children are receiving the help they need at the right time. Families benefit from a broad range of Early Help, tailored to their needs and in the places where they live. Partnership working is well-developed, offering a range of options that build on families' strengths and can be provided without delay. Our performance monitoring is indicating that we are making progress in rebalancing the system towards early help with an increase in early help assessments and a decrease in child protection plans and excluding unaccompanied asylum-seeking children a reduction in the numbers of children in our care. Our integrated multi-professional locality teams provide efficient and effective Step-up Step-down between Early Help and

Social Care with appropriate and robust management oversight. Children who enter our care do so in a planned way and increasingly following a period of Pre-Proceedings planning. 98.5% of children in care for 4 months or more have a completed Permanence plan in place.

- 2.3 Our SEND services deliver in an integrated way with colleagues from across early help (including our SEND early help offer), children's and adult's social care, education psychology, inclusion and education improvement service. This has enabled our services to hold our most vulnerable and disadvantaged children at the heart of our work and maintain ambitious outcomes through a whole system approach in partnership with education settings.
- 2.4 Our workforce continues to be largely stable and have manageable workloads. The vacancy rate in social work remains low at 5%. We continue with our 'grow our own' and apprenticeship programme for social workers. Multi-agency toolkits are in place and workforce training, learning and development is promoted and undertaken to ensure staff and managers understand and meet the child and families' needs focusing on impact and outcomes.

3. **Progress since last year**

- 3.1 Since our annual self-evaluation last year we have delivered an action plan to strengthen our care leavers service, in particular our oversight of arrangements when care leavers move in and out of emergency and temporary accommodation and supervision of the workforce. Our personal advisors continue to have strong relationships with care leavers and our Care Leaver Delivery Group, chaired by the Lead Member for Safeguarding, has ensured that this area of work have progressed including a joint protocol between children's services and housing to improve the housing offer, ensuring access to advice and support and co-production of our digital care leaver offer.
- 3.2 Partnership working across the Strategic Alliance for Children and Young People to deliver our joint Children, Young People and Families Plan (2020-23) continued and we are now working together on the development of a longer-term plan to continue to improve the lives of children and families and support the Dorset Council Plan commitment to create Strong and Healthy Communities.
- 3.3 We have improved the way we work with families when we are worried about children and are considering making an application to court by

improving the information we provide to families so they are clear about our concerns and expectations; by improving our processes for our workforce and improving manager oversight; and close working between legal services and children services.

- 3.5 We continue to be a learning organisation with the use data and data dashboards, to inform service improvements as part of our Performance Management Framework and participation in peer review and have continued to seek and offer support with sector leaders throughout the year. This includes participation in a safeguarding in education peer review with Swindon, developing leadership in the southwest and engaging with Oxford Brookes University as an academic partner to help us to continuously improve.

4. **Our focus for continuous improvement**

- 4.1 We will continue to focus on improving our service offer for our care leavers, focusing on ensuring our care leavers have the right place to live, are able to find education, training and/or work and have strong social networks.
- 4.2 Integration of commissioning arrangements will be a focus, with real opportunities to work differently with the Integrated Care Board (ICB) to better meet the needs of individuals and populations.
- 4.3 We will focus on improving the quality of educational provision and narrowing the gap between children from disadvantaged groups and their peers through our Dorset Education Board.
- 4.4 We will continue to deliver our SEND Capital Strategy so that more children can benefit from good or outstanding education provision.
- 4.5 We will continue to improve our care sufficiency through the further opening of internal residential provision, a greater level of foster carer recruitment and retention and the opening of our homes for Care Leavers
- 4.6 We will continue to improve services across the partnership through our embedded Strengthening Services Plan. Our multi-agency partnership will undertake new programmes to tackle emerging themes affecting our communities.
- 4.7 We will continue to evolve our Children, Young People and Families' Plan, to include local and national priorities, whilst continuing to report to our partnership and communities on the impact its delivery is making.

- 4.8 We will deliver a different approach to supporting children and young people with Special Educational Needs and or Disabilities into adulthood through our Birth to Settled Adulthood Programme.
- 4.9 We will continue to evolve our Children, Young People and Families' Plan, to include local and national priorities, whilst continuing to report to our partnership and communities on the impact its delivery is making.

5. **Financial Implications**

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report, however it should be noted that a well-functioning children's services directorate is essential to the financial stability of the council.

6. **Environmental Implications**

There are no environmental arising directly from this report.

7. **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.

8. **Other Implications**

None identified.

9. **Risk Assessment**

- 9.1 The level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

10. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

Not required for this report

11. **Appendices**

Appendix 1: Self-Evaluation

12. **Background Papers**

None