

Cabinet

9 July 2024

Children's Services Annual Engagement 'Self-Evaluation' 2024

For Decision

Cabinet Member and Portfolio:

Cllr. C Sutton, Children's Services, Education & Skills

Local Councillor(s):

All

Executive Director:

T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children

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Report Status: Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

Brief Summary:

This report provides oversight and assurance that Dorset is effectively discharging its statutory duties within children's services.

Children's Services operate within a statutory inspection framework, 'Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services' (ILACS). Every year, each local authority must undertake a self-evaluation against the [published inspection criteria](#). The self-evaluation focuses on the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection, experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers and the impact of leaders on practice with children and families. The self-evaluation also provides an overview of education and learning outcomes for children and young people.

Leaders within children's services meet with Ofsted, the inspection body responsible for overseeing the quality of children's services nationally, on an

annual basis to discuss their self-evaluation, review the progress and impact of existing services, and to discuss priorities for the next 12-months. This meeting is called the Annual Engagement Meeting and for Dorset the most recent meeting took place on Tuesday 18th June 2024.

Key areas of strength and our priorities are summarised in the main body of the report below. The full Self-Evaluation document is provided as an appendix to this report (appendix one).

Recommendation:

Cabinet is asked to review and consider the contents of the Annual Self-Evaluation of Children's Services May 2024, noting strengths, areas for development and priorities for the next 12 months.

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 provide Cabinet with an overview of progress and highlight strengths and areas for development for the next 12-months.

1. Report

- 1.1 Local Authorities, Children's Services, through their delivery of statutory duties to children, young people and families are subject to regular regulatory inspection by Ofsted.
- 1.2 Dorset last received a full inspection under the Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) Framework in October 2021. Dorset received a rating of 'good' overall, with 'outstanding' for leaders impact on improving social work practice.
- 1.3 As a result of the 'good' judgement, Dorset is on Ofsted's Pathway 1 for good and outstanding authorities under the inspection framework. Local authorities judged to be good or outstanding at their most recent inspection will usually receive a short inspection about 3 years after their previous inspection. In between inspections the local authority will usually receive one focused visit or Joint Targeted Area Inspection.
- 1.4 Dorset received a ['focused visit'](#) in May 2023, this focused on Care Leaver Services. Inspectors reported that *'leaders have significantly strengthened support and services for care leavers and have made notable improvements in the quality and standard of their accommodation'*.

- 1.5 One area of development was found, to improve the quality and timeliness of supervision for Personal Advisers in the Care Leavers Service. This has significantly improved since the focused visit with the quality and frequency of supervision routinely monitored by managers and senior leaders.
- 1.6 In February 2023 Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) informed Dorset Council and NHS Dorset that they would undertake a Local Area SEND Inspection.
- 1.7 The 3-week Local Area SEND Inspection was held in February to March 2024, with findings reported to Cabinet on the 11th June 2024. Ofsted and CQC Dorset partners received the highest judgement for this inspection: *'The local area partnership's special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) arrangements typically lead to positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND'*.
- 1.8 In line with the ILACS Framework, local authorities are required to meet annually with Ofsted in an Annual Engagement Meeting to provide their 'self-evaluation' of effectiveness at providing services and to discuss and agree priorities. The 2024 'Annual Engagement Meeting' between Dorset Council and Ofsted took place on 18th June 2024.
- 1.9 The Annual Self Evaluation, is provided as an appendix to this report and responds to Ofsted's required criteria:
- What we know about the quality and impact of practice
 - How do we know it?
 - What are your plans for the next 12 months to maintain or improve practice?
- 1.10 As part of our self-evaluation process, an Annual Test of Assurance against the criteria set out within the Statutory Duties of the Director of Children's Services and Lead Member for Children's Services has also been completed. This is provided as an appendix to this report (appendix two).
- 1.11 **Headline strengths continue to be reported in our Self-Evaluation and include:**

Our strong and solid foundations that are enabling our performance:

- Ambitious leadership and vision, shared by and visible across all senior leaders, partners and staff – evidenced most recently in the Local Area SEND Inspection.
- Strong partnership working evidenced through our maturing local area partnership: Strategic Alliance for Children, Young People and Families, Strengthening Services for Children and Families Board, Dorset Education Board.
- A strong and stable workforce across the senior leadership team and front-line practice.
- Innovative and embedded practice model (Dorset Children Thrive – our way of working with our children and families) externally evaluated and nationally recognised. We are now building on our model to become multi-agency.
- Increasing placement sufficiency through transformative programmes for example: Mockingbird (Fostering communities), Birth to Settled Adulthood, Harbour (Early Help and intervention), Dorset Centre of Excellence.

1.12 Headline achievements for 2023/24 reported include:

- Building on our existing plan, we launched our ten-year Children, Young People and Families Plan. (Appendix three)
- Launched our co-produced Belonging Strategy.
- Selected as one of only three local authority areas to participate in Wave One of the Families First for Children Pathfinder and successful partnership and stakeholder co-design work completed.
- Made good progress on developing our network of Family Hubs.
- Launched our 0 to 25 Birth to Settled Adulthood Service for children and young people with a disability/complex needs.
- Participating in the 'Re-imagining Pre-proceedings' pilot with The Family Rights Group and the local judiciary.
- Developing a refreshed Sufficiency Strategy, and further developing our in-house residential and outreach provision.

- Establishing our 3rd, 4th and 5th Mockingbird Fostering constellations and being invited by the Mockingbird Society in Seattle to visit them in Seattle to share our implementation journey, our achievements and our learning.
- Secured positive outcomes at inspection: Ofsted Focussed Visit on our Care Leavers Service (May 23), 'Good' grading's in all children's homes inspections in year, 'Grade 1' outcome in our very recent SEND inspection (May 24).
- We have implemented an additional education leadership group which includes Department for Education Regional Office, Diocese and Chief Executive Officers of all Academy Trusts to take a strategic view of our educational estate, improve inclusion, and ensure comprehensive leadership and reach of our Dorset Education Board projects.
- On 31 January 2024 we were awarded Earned Autonomy status for the Supporting Families programme for 2024-25. We evidenced during assessment the required standard of maturity in the development of our Early Help System.
- The team continues to undertake Sector Led Improvement Work with fellow local authorities.
- Further progressed our work regarding Extra-familial Harm including launch of new Assessment, Panel and Extra-familial Harm Strategy.
- We were delighted to receive a high response rate from our young people through the Bright Spots Survey providing us with a rich body of information to further shape our services.
- Delivered 21 independent living options for our Care Leavers with a further 20 being progressed.
- Our work on Integrated and Joint Commissioning with NHS Colleagues continues to develop in ambition and in practice. Work to embed integrated staffing within our Front Door and practitioners within our locality model continue to progress and our integrated teams are growing e.g. Safeguarding Families Together, Birth to Settled Adulthood, Clinical psychology and Speech and Language Therapy.

- Inviting external scrutiny from Oxford Brookes University to review our Dorset Children Thrive locality model – Oxford Brookes reported positive impact of our locality model was evidenced well.
- Continued focus on growing our career development channels, leading regional work and the Staff College.
- Continued to build on our youth voice work for example recruiting a Youth Voice Practitioner to work with our children with special educational needs or disabilities and implementing Mind of My Own.
- Successfully Secured Funding including: £1m for Capital Assets works for Kinship and Foster Carers, £324,000 for Care Leavers befriending and mentoring scheme, £10.6m Safety Valve capital funding, funding to support families with the cost of living.

1.13 Our plans that will enable us to maintain and improve practice are to:

- Ensure safe delivery of the Families First for Children Pathfinder.
- Ensure family decision making is at the heart of all we do.
- Continue our work with schools and settings as we work together to close the gap in Educational Outcomes.
- Progress the actions in our post Local Area SEND Inspection Plan.
- Fully implement our refreshed Safeguarding Partnership arrangements (agreed by Cabinet 11th June 2024)
- Further understand and address the reasons behind the increase of Elective Home Education.
- Complete our roll out of Family Hubs, enabling partnership services to support families in their communities.
- Fully embed our Birth to Settled Adulthood Service, pursuing timely integration with health partners into the model
- Roll out Safeguarding Families Together across the County enhancing our approach to also focus on care leavers and as part of our multi-agency child protection enhancements through Pathfinder.

- Respond to the findings of the Family Rights Group and feedback from our Kinship Carers Reference Group to improve the experiences of families in pre-proceedings.
- Improve multi-agency delivery of services to care leavers to address poor mental health and deliver improved education, employment and training engagement and outcomes.
- Commission new supported housing to welcome the increased number of children and young people who are unaccompanied and seeking asylum.
- Deliver improved local care placement sufficiency, stability and permanence for children in care to support improved mental health and education outcomes.
- Continue to progress our plans to build on Integrated Commissioning to improve outcomes for all children in Dorset including those with complex needs.
- Building on our initial work, fully implement Mind of My Own as a tool to further strengthen young people's voices.
- Following our application to Coram Voice, if we are successful, engaging in a project to embed emotional wellbeing indicators into our business as usual performance management/quality assurance
- Following commitment from the Chief Executive Officer group to be responsive to changing patterns in education outcomes, embed our Dorset Education Board Task and Finish approach.
- Review our Early Help Strategy in line with Children, Young People and Families Plan and Pathfinder reforms.
- Embed our extended role of the Virtual School for children with a social worker and our children living with their families through Kinship Care.
- Implement the Youth Sufficiency Strategy with our partners, in line with requirements of the revised statutory guidance to Local Authorities on services and activities to improve young people's well-being.

- Re-shaping our Commissioning function to further enhance our Directorate 'engine room'.
- Continue to build, develop and maintain a skilled and stable workforce.

1.14 **Annual Engagement Meeting Headlines**

Inspectors were assured of progress made since the 2023 Annual Engagement Meeting and of the areas of focus for 2024/25. Areas of discussion included:

- Continuing to support all Elected Members in their new roles regarding children, young people and families.
- Dorset's strategic context and continued commitment to children, young people and families.
- Dorset's strategic and operational partnership working including with health, education partners, police and adults services and changes to the Safeguarding Partnership.
- Extra-familial Harm and how local strategy is being implemented.
- Supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- Foster Care – supporting carers and encouraging more members of the community to consider becoming a foster carer.
- The implementation of Families First for Children enhancements to the Dorset Children Thrive model and appropriate identification and response to neglect.
- Implementation of Harbour East.
- Birth to Settled Adulthood Service.

1.15 We remain continually ambitious for our children and will ensure progress against these priorities is reported to our existing committee and partnership governance channels throughout 2024/25.

2. **Financial Implications**

Significant if intervention measures required. None over existing budgets at this time.

3. **Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications**

None over planned operational delivery.

4. **Well-being and Health Implications**

Significant negative impact if systemic or significant failings occur. Improvements to wellbeing and health anticipated and planned as part of delivery of children's services, in partnership with statutory and non-statutory partners across Dorset.

5. **Other Implications**

None

6. **Risk Assessment**

6.1 **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**

Children's Services operates across a range of statutory frameworks and legal legislations which ensure equality and accessibility.

8. **Appendices**

Appendix one: Dorset Children's Services Self-Evaluation 2024

Appendix two: Dorset Annual Test of Assurance 2024

Appendix three: Strategic Alliance's Children, Young People and Families' Plan 2023-33: [Children, Young People and Families' Plan 2023 to 2033 - Dorset Council](#)

9. **Background Papers**

Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services: ILACS Framework: [Inspecting local authority children's services - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

2023 Focused visit report: [50220984 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](#)

2024 Local Area SEND Inspection Letter: [50246984 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](#)

Statutory Guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services
[Statutory Guidance for DCS and LMCS](#)

10. **Report Sign Off**

- 10.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)