



MONDAY 14 DECEMBER 2020

CHILDREN'S IMPROVEMENT UPDATE

Purpose of report:

To provide an update on the improvement of Surrey's children's services and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the improvement programme and the delivery of frontline services. This report provides further information on the services and activity outlined in the last report to the Select Committee on 28 July 2020.

Introduction:

1. Following the major restructure of children's services completed in 2019, the Family Resilience improvement programme has continued in 2020 throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and while some resources have shifted to support other parts of the service, improving frontline practice is critical and it therefore remains a priority for the CFLLC directorate. The improvement programme is in the final year of delivery and is embedding the new ways of working to ensure profound and rapid improvements to children's services in Surrey so that all children in the county receive the right help at the right time.
2. Since the last report in July, the next iteration of the improvement plan - the 'Getting to Good' plan - has been developed and this goes beyond the inspection findings from 2018; Effective Family Resilience is an entirely new practice model and therefore a more ambitious and innovative improvement plan is required.
3. The third Mockingbird Hub was launched as planned in August helping to provide more, and more stable, homes with foster families. Our Universal Youth Work consultation concluded in the summer and we are now focussed on enabling the community, voluntary and faith sector (CVFS) to use the youth centres for the benefit of young people and acting as an enabler and facilitator of open access universal youth work in Surrey. Ensuring there is one single point of access for families to our services has moved a step further with the Learners Single Point of Access (SPA) merging with the Children's SPA in September. We are also fortunate that, with agreement from the Department for Education (DfE), Essex County Council has been appointed as a Partner in Practice (PiP) for Surrey's children's service and we welcome their support on our improvement journey.

4. Despite continuing to drive improvement, the Covid-19 pandemic has inevitably had a major impact on delivery of frontline services. We have seen demand increase dramatically across almost all services with referrals increasing by over 30% since February, children subject to Child Protection Plans up 15% and over 100 children coming into the care system in the last 3 months alone. The increase in demand is leading to increased caseloads for social care practitioners and combined with 30 social work vacancies, a high turnover of staff and 25% agency rate, we expect to see an impact on timeliness and quality if increased levels of referrals continue through the autumn and winter. We have a renewed focus on improving the recruitment and retention of social work staff across our services however the challenge is made more difficult due to the pandemic and should not be underestimated.

4.1 Annex 1 (Performance Information for Select Committee December 2020) contains key reports and performance information from the October 2020 Performance Compendium and the Children's Services Analysis Tool. This is referenced in paragraphs 10-13.

5. A summary of the Monthly Case Audit Programme, Thematic Auditing and Mock Inspections was shared in July and a further update is provided in this report in response to the Committee's recommendation. Disappointingly the overall quality of frontline services shown in the recent audits does not demonstrate any significant improvement in the level of inadequate practice. We are re-doubling our efforts on improving this and have identified several key priorities that our frontline managers, social workers and quality assurance staff will be focussing on over the next few months.

5.1 Annex 2 (Audit Highlight Report Nov'18 to Sep'20) contains the latest update from the Monthly Case Audit Programme. Key practice findings are outlined from auditing in August and September 2020. The report also includes the results of all monthly audits from November 2018 to September 2020. This is referenced in paragraphs 32-34.

5.2 Annex 3 (QA & Inspection Readiness Thematic Overview Report Sept 2020) contains an update on the themed auditing activity taking place across children's services. This is referenced in paragraphs 35-37.

Impact of Covid-19 on Children's Services

Children's Services and the Second 'Lockdown'

6. The second national lockdown starting in November presents additional challenges for the delivery of children's services however arrangements have been put in place quickly to reduce the impact. Our focus continues to be on delivering the essential work to support Surrey's residents, to safeguard children and to maintain consistency across frontline services wherever possible.

7. We have continued to restore services with most now up and running in a 'normal way' (under Covid-19 restrictions) and nearly all of our children and families will continue to be seen face to face rather than virtually - in line with government guidance. As of 12 November 2020, 82% of Looked After Children have been visited (face to face) within timescales, 81% of children subject of a Child Protection Plan and 70% of children subject of a Child in Need Plan.
8. We have been supporting the reopening of Surrey schools, colleges and early years settings for all children since September, providing guidance on risk assessments and what to do in the event of symptomatic staff or pupils. Close partnership working through SAfE, the schools-led improvement partnership, has been important to develop catch-up programmes for children who have fallen behind in their learning and development as a result of Covid-19.
9. Our staff have proved to be incredibly resilient and worked very hard to ensure children are kept safe and supported throughout the pandemic and we continue to ask managers to risk assess any team members returning to offices and are regularly reviewing these to ensure that new concerns and questions are picked up. There are currently approximately 20 staff across children's services that are absent due to Covid-19.

Increases in Demand & Pressure on Frontline Services

10. This section of the report outlines the impact of Covid-19 on the demand for – and delivery of – frontline children's services. The commentary here should be read alongside the attached performance report providing more detailed charts & data (see *ANNEX 1 - Performance Information for Select Committee December 2020*).
11. The increase in contacts to the Children's Single Point of Access (C-SPA) during lockdown has led to a similar increase in referrals to social care. This has impacted on the re-referral rate and the number of children subject to a repeat assessment, Section 47 and Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC). Whilst this has not impacted on timeliness for a child to progress through the system, where targets are being achieved, we continue to see increases in the number of children subject to a child protection plan for a subsequent time. See *ANNEX 1, slides 3 – 9* for further information.
 - 11.1 The increased numbers of contacts from our statutory partners to the C-SPA continued in September, with 49% of contacts having an outcome of 'information and advice'. Average timeliness to progress to Early Help (three working days) or from the MAP team to the Assessment Service (two working days) has remained consistent. We have also worked with Police and Health colleagues to reduce the lower level contacts. The service co-hosted 2 webinars with the voluntary, faith and community

sector to share challenges and support each other to reach to more families during the pandemic. We have engaged the support of the Surrey Safeguarding Children's Partnership (SSCP) to challenge partners to take more responsibility for sourcing support at Level 2 instead of going through the C-SPA. SSCP has requested a report on the progress of this initiative in December 2020.

- 11.2 The increase in contacts has led to a 17% increase in referrals as at 30th September when compared to the previous two months. During this time the number of re-referrals has also increased from 19% in May (174 children) to 26% in September (289 children).
 - 11.3 There are currently over 1500 open assessments in social care teams, the number of open assessments has incrementally increased since April and is now the highest number since February 2020.
 - 11.4 Recent months have seen an increase in strategy discussions and Section 47 Enquiries taking place which has led to a 15% increase in the number children subject to Initial Child Protection conferences. The number of children subject to a CP plan has increased from 696 in April to 770 in September. This is a 30% increase compared to September 2019 (593 children).
12. There has been an increase in children coming into care during lockdown, specifically teenagers on section 20 (voluntary) agreements. Comparisons with national, regional and statistical neighbours suggests Surrey is potentially an outlier in this area. See *ANNEX 1, slide 10* for more information.
 - 12.1 Excluding 10 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), there have been 102 new entrants to the care system between July and September 2020. Over two thirds of these children and young people started with a voluntary, Section 20 agreement. There were 19 (28%) children aged between 10 and 15 years of age in this cohort and 20 (29%) young people aged 16 or 17 years of age when they entered care on a S20 agreement.
 - 12.2 As at 30th September 2020, there were 1004 children looked after by Surrey, 77 of these are UASC, all under 18 years of age. The rate per 10,000 is 38 children and young people. This remains significantly below statistical neighbours (48), the region (53) and national figures for 2018/19 (65).
 13. The increase in demand is leading to increased caseloads, specifically in Assessment, Safeguarding and Care Leaver service (in addition to the legislative changes that enable young people to have a service extended up to their 25th birthday, when previously 21st). Combined with 30 social work vacancies, a high turnover of staff and 25% agency rate, the increase in demand will start to impact on timeliness and quality if increased levels of referrals continue through the autumn and winter. See *ANNEX 1, slide 11* for more information.

13.1 Average caseload numbers across all services appear to be manageable at 16 children per worker. However, there is significant variation in this numbers at service and quadrant level:

- a) There are many social workers in assessment teams with caseloads between 25-30 children, some with 35 or more, one with over 40 children. However, it is usual for assessment teams to have higher caseloads than teams providing longer-term support. There are specific workers and teams whose caseloads have increased, and we are supporting these teams; it is encouraging that performance across the assessment teams remains high despite the challenges with workload.
- b) There are a few examples where CP and LAC social workers have more than 15 children and young people allocated to them, though the data indicates this is an exception to the rule.
- c) Care Leaver caseloads average 18 young people, some Personal Advisors have 20+, the highest recorded number of allocations is 24.

13.2 We have appointed 40 newly qualified Social Workers recently however these practitioners do not have a full caseload until the latter part of their first year in social work employment. Some additional funding specifically to mitigate the impact due to Covid-19 has been used to add capacity to the teams in the medium-term.

Children's Improvement Update

14. As previously reported to the Select Committee, the service has embarked upon a comprehensive transformation programme with a major restructure of children's services completing last year to support the shift to the Effective Family Resilience model based on early support and prevention. The significant internal and external scrutiny of the improvement programme shows the huge amount of progress made to improve services. The overall aims of the Family Resilience Programme remain the same; to ensure that all children in the county receive the right help at the right time to enable them and their families to develop resilience to face future life challenges independently.
15. The key goals that drive the programme are the need to change the culture and practice in pursuit of consistently better outcomes for children, young people and their families. We aim to:
 - a) Be smarter in terms of how we utilise the full partnership network – to provide more robust and resourced services at an earlier stage in the child's journey. We will use our leadership position to coordinate, promote cooperation and direct work to protect and safeguard children in this area.

- b) Commission an effective Universal Services and Early Help offer in Surrey to promote and improve the wellbeing and welfare of children in our area through increased coordination, recording and ownership of early intervention activity with partner agencies.
- c) Reduce the overall cost of services for children in Surrey through reallocation of resources to focus on earlier intervention and reduced demand (and spend) on higher cost, higher need services.
- d) Have smarter allocation of resources within the county, stepping down children to lower levels of need with smarter case management and follow-up/follow-through of care planning.
- e) Realign the workforce to enable the effective operation of the new Surrey Family Resilience and Safeguarding operating model.
- f) Achieve an overall Ofsted rating of Good or Outstanding for Surrey's children's services within 5 years from the last inspection.

Inspections & External Scrutiny

- 16. **Ofsted Inspections:** Following the suspension of routine inspections in March 2020 due to COVID-19, they have now outlined their interim plans for a phased return to routine inspections. These interim arrangements will run initially from late September until March 2021 and Surrey's children's services look forward to hosting Ofsted for a Focussed Visit during this period and will welcome feedback on how the local authority has supported children, young people and families throughout the pandemic. The national inspection activity is expected to resume from April 2021 and we are anticipating a full re-inspection of Surrey's children's services later in 2021.
- 17. **A Partner in Practice:** We are fortunate that, with agreement from the Department for Education (DfE), Essex County Council has been appointed as a Partner in Practice (PiP) for Surrey's children's services. Essex CC is rated as 'Outstanding' for Children's Services and specialises in working alongside other authorities to improve social work practice, and outcomes for children and their families. In September they carried out a full stocktake of our services and their initial feedback shows how far we've come since 2018 and their feedback has reinforced our improvement plans and the priorities set out in the 'Getting to Good' plan. We are excited to be working with Essex CC and welcome the support on our journey to delivering Good and Outstanding services for our residents.

Improvement Updates Since July 2020

18. Over the 2021-2022 period, all remaining transformation work planned as part of the Family Resilience programme is expected to be fully implemented. There are several work-streams that are continuing from the previous year along with one or two additional projects starting in the latter part of 2020 or early 2021:
19. **Getting to Good:** While the Covid-19 pandemic has put a strain on resources across children's services and we are seeing an increase in demand in most parts of the 'system', the focus on improving practice has not stopped. The next iteration of the improvement plan - the 'Getting to Good' plan - has been developed over the summer with input from all services through a collaborative approach and with strong buy-in from across the management and senior leadership team. The plan incorporates the learning from previous inspections, peer reviews, feedback from children and families and the significant amount of quality assurance work. The plan goes beyond the inspection findings from 2018; Effective Family Resilience is an entirely new practice model and therefore a more ambitious and innovative improvement plan is required to 'Get us to Good' and as previously reported, we are driven by improving outcomes for children and families and not simply on solving the issues highlighted by Ofsted, the DfE and the Commissioner.
20. **Children's Services Workforce:** Our workers within children's services are our most important and valuable strength and the ability to recruit and retain an excellent workforce also remains the greatest risk to our improvement plan; the impact of Covid-19 combined with 30 social work vacancies, a high turnover of staff and 25% agency rate reinforces the need to focus our efforts on our staff. We have a comprehensive plan to develop our workforce strategy and improve our employee value proposition. This is a transformation project and is headed by a talented HR consultant and the implementation of the plan is overseen by the Director for Safeguarding and Family Resilience. This strategy will enable us to retain, develop and attract the best workers to Surrey and to cultivate a positive culture that is positive, supportive and meets the needs of our practitioners and managers. In addition, the Council's People, Performance and Development Committee (PPDC) recently agreed a new financial package to attract and retain qualified social workers to join our service and this includes a £2000 retention payment to eligible social workers who have been in the service from 2 years or more.
21. **L-SPA & C-SPA Integration:** We are merging the Children's Single Point of Access (C-SPA) and the Learners Single Point of Access (L-SPA) to ensure there is one route for families to contact us, where there is a concern about the child or young person's needs, whether safeguarding, Early Help, learning and/or developmental needs. The C-SPA was set up in Spring 2019 and has been working successfully since and we've built on this and the lessons learnt to help launch the integrated L-SPA in summer 2020 alongside a relocation of these services to a larger workspace in Woking. The impact of Covid-19 both on the ability for teams to work together on a day-to-day basis and the significant increases in contacts and referrals has put additional challenges on the C-SPA and L-SPA. We are working closely with our partners including

schools, police and health as tackling these difficulties and increased workload using a complete partnership approach is the best way to ensure the needs of our most vulnerable residents are met.

22. **Emergency Duty Team (EDT):** We boosted capacity in EDT to manage the increased pressures of lockdown. This included youth workers, family group conference coordinators, the Gateway team (placements), additional social workers and a mental health triage nurse. We were able to prevent family breakdown at evenings and weekends by immediately sending the team to work directly with families and then directing the right support to them from day teams. We have evaluated the impact of this model of delivery, researched other counties' EDT models and have agreed a new service model that enables us to continue the extended level of out-of-hours support as our business as usual model.
23. **Family Safeguarding Model:** In Surrey, the Family Safeguarding Model brings together under one roof all the professionals needed to help children and this ground-breaking approach has proved highly successful in other authorities around the country. The specialist workers for domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health expertise have now joined the teams, we're shifting to more multi-disciplinary case discussions and have new tools to support our direct work with children and their families. Motivational Interviewing techniques are key to this practice model and the training offer has continued over the last few months with a new rollout being planned for SCC staff and our partners in the new year. This new practice model has proven to be highly effective throughout the pandemic as keeping families together is an important focus of the model and our Family Safeguarding teams work openly and honestly with families about their difficulties and how we can support them to change.
24. **Mockingbird:** The third Mockingbird Hub was launched as planned in August and feedback from those foster carers involved indicates that it provides a truly supportive network to the benefit of both children in care and their carers. Providing comfortable and safe homes for our children is a priority of all parents, no less of SCC as corporate parents, and various projects have continued apace linked to this aspect of our Strategy. Providing more, and more stable, homes with foster families is what our Mockingbird Family Model is all about. Recruitment of new fostering families has been challenging this year however we have quickly shifted to virtual fostering panels and making better use of technology to stay in contact with our carers and provide the much needed support during such a difficult time.
25. **Helping Families Early Strategy:** A critical recommendation from Ofsted was that partners should do more to support families through early help. The launch of our Helping Families Early Strategy was delayed by the pandemic but we went live 3rd November through a Webinar which was attended by in excess of 170 people. The strategy is supported by Family Resilience Networks in each of our quadrants. These Networks meet at least quarterly and SSCP will receive a

quarterly report on the progress of the strategy. All 4 quadrants have now hosted their first Network which were well attended with representatives from across the sector.

26. **Universal Youth Work:** In June, our Universal Youth Work consultation concluded after running for over 6 months and as a result we have agreed that:
- We enable the community, voluntary and faith sector (CVFS) to use the youth centres for the benefit of young people at little or no cost. We act as an enabler and facilitator of open access universal youth work rather than providing the service directly. The SCC expertise that is valued by residents - and in particular young people - can then be remodelled to continue to support specific vulnerable groups.*
- 26.1 Our priority is to make sure the centres are first and foremost benefiting young people in the community but there will also be opportunities in some centres for wider community use as the plans for each of the centres are progressed. It is a difficult time to be offering youth activities at the moment as children and young people over the age of 11 are required to wear face coverings, as are youth workers, and the groups are limited in size. While this is slowing things down in the signing of leases and our work with the Lead Providers, it will not dampen the enthusiasm of our voluntary sector partners in the medium term.
- 26.2 During the latest national lockdown some education, training and childcare is permitted in youth centre buildings and also supports one-to-one work where it's necessary. We continue to provide frontline services for young people wherever the guidance allows for it and some of the centres are being used for alternative education provision as has been the case since restrictions were first put in place in March.
27. **No Wrong Door:** With the support of the Members' Reference Group which is reporting at this meeting, our Corporate Parenting teams are developing a local 'No Wrong Door' service, a well-evaluated short term residential model that was first developed in North Yorkshire in 2015 and offers an integrated approach to supporting some of the most vulnerable teenagers who are either in care, or at risk of coming into care. The service will be up and running by April 2021 and will initially operate from two of our current children's homes before two purpose-built hubs are completed in 2022 under the capital development programme. Further detail is contained in the reports to Select Committee (from the Member Reference Group) for this meeting.

28. **IT & Digital Services:** With support from colleagues in IT & Digital we have continued throughout the summer to innovate and implement new and improved systems and IT solutions to support our residents.

28.1 As a result of some focused work earlier this year, the council identified the need to make it easier for parents/carers to find helpful information, advice and support for themselves, their children or their family. The **'Surrey's Little Help Shop'** project, (the name was chosen by young people), has been set up in response to this need, to try and develop a digital solution that helps navigate the complexity and scale of information that parents are faced with when looking for help.

28.2 In October we signed an agreement with Liquid Logic to procure their **EYES system** that can integrate fully with their Early Help and Social Care modules that are already in use across Children Services. This is an ambitious change programme which will enable a 'single view of the child' across multiple systems. Allowing professionals across the span of Children's Services to spend more time with children and their families, better understand the whole of their journey and ensure sustainable high-quality evidence-based interventions and support to meet children's needs, particularly our most vulnerable, and accurately record, analyse and project costs.

28.3 The [Surrey Virtual Wellbeing Hub](#) is a singular place where you can view and access a range of online sessions and activities to support your mental health and wellbeing during Covid-19 and beyond. Partnering with third sector providers including The Richmond Fellowship, Catalyst, the Mary Frances Trust, Age UK Surrey and Surrey Coalition of Disabled People, any Surrey resident can now easily access local support online and from the comfort of their own home.

28.4 **Parenting Guides:** Children and Family Health Surrey in partnership with Surrey County Council have a range of [free online parenting guides](#) available to access from their website. These guides have been written by experts and offer families the opportunity to understand their child's emotional development to support relationships and parenting challenges as they grow. They contain advice relevant to expectant parents, parents and carers of children of all ages including those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Quality Assurance of Children's Services Practice
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29. As reported to the Committee in July 2020, the focus of the improvement work has shifted this year to have a greater focus **on the impact of the work** on

children and families and the quality of practice across children's services. A summary of the Monthly Case Audit Programme, Thematic Auditing and Mock Inspections was shared in July and a further update is provided in this report in response to the Committee's recommendation.

30. A key part of our work to quality assure frontline practice is seeking feedback from parents, carers, partners and children (where appropriate). This feedback is shared with individual social workers and their managers to build on positive feedback and to learn from the areas identified as needing improvement.

30.1 Some of the strengths highlighted in these conversations include:

- a) Open and transparent relationships between social workers and parents.
- b) Very positive feedback about Social workers being committed to families and their needs – from children, parents and carers.
- c) Social workers taking the time to explaining the direct work they are undertaking, the goals and the support to move to a position of independence.

30.2 We did hear about areas for improvement in our frontline practice as well though:

- a) Some children and families have had multiple social workers over months and years.
- b) Unnecessary delays receiving information from social workers. A common theme running through the feedback was that communication needed to improve.
- c) Join-up between social care services and SEND and CAMHS services could be improved

Monthly Case Audit Programme

31. The audit programme introduced in November 2018 provides the opportunity to review the quality of practice and effectiveness of the work being undertaken with children and their families. A selection of cases identified from a cross-section of children's services teams are audited each month along with several re-audits (of cases previously judged to be 'inadequate'). Due to the importance of this quality assurance work, we have not reduced or paused auditing since the last report in July.
32. Regular highlight reports continue to be produced outlining the findings of the programme and importantly – the actions taken as a result. The most recent highlight report is attached here (see *ANNEX 2 - Audit Highlight Report Nov'18 to Sep'20*).

33. Disappointingly the overall quality of frontline services shown in the recent audits does not demonstrate any significant improvement in the level of inadequate practice since our last report to the Select Committee in July. The majority of practice is judged to be 'requires improvement' with roughly 20% judged as 'good' and 15% judged as 'inadequate' (see ANNEX 2, pages 2-3). This is not good enough for the children and families we work with and we are re-doubling our efforts on improving this and have identified several key priorities that our frontline managers, social workers and quality assurance staff will be focussing on over the next few months.
34. While auditing is key to ensure we 'know ourselves', highlight best practice (that we can learn from) and highlight practice needing improvement it is essential that this is followed through and leads to real change in the quality of frontline practice experienced by the children and families we support. The high-priority practice recommendations for the months August and September 2020 are:
- 34.1 Managers to ensure that supervision is held in line with expected timescales and evidences reflective discussion, impact of intervention, proactive decision making where there is drift and delay and review of decision / actions that support driving the plan forward.
- 34.2 Management oversights / case discussions are recorded to respond to significant events/ changes in circumstances/ how overdue task will be addressed together with the rationale for the decision making and timescales.
- 34.3 Managers, Social Workers, CPC's and IRO's to ensure that planning and review for children is timely and that any drift or delay is responded to with a clear plan of how this will be managed and addressed.
- 34.4 All teams to review and reflect on the key learning identified for children that go missing and are vulnerable to exploitation and hidden crimes, including:
- a) Response and timeliness to children who go missing;
 - b) Timeliness and quality of CSE risk assessments, so that they are pertinent to the current risks, include a plan of intervention to reduce risks and evidence the child's and parent's contribution;
 - c) Risk assessments for children who are at risk from sexual harm both within and outside their homes and how we engage partner agencies to support the child, their family and us in the resulting plans.

Thematic Audit Programme

35. Since the last report, three thematic audits have been completed and we are in a position to report on the key findings and actions being implemented for these services. The findings from these thematic reviews are attached here for the Select Committee (see *ANNEX 3 - Quality Assurance and Inspection Readiness Thematic Overview Report September 2020*) and include emerging themes on the following practice areas:
- Placement Stability
 - Family Group Conferences and Family Network Meetings
 - Youth Offending Service Review
 - Independent Chair Engagement with Children, Young People, Parents and Carers (emerging themes only)
36. It is essential that the learning and identified improvements are embedded in the operational services as a result. The Audit & Practice Standards Leads and the Inspection Leads within the QA Division are working alongside frontline teams to support and monitor the embedding of the recommendations & improvements in frontline practice. Updates are reported to the Practice Leadership Team on regular basis to ensure the services can respond quickly when challenges arise.
37. The thematic audits are a key part of the QA forward plan and we will continue to conduct these on a mix of practice areas to ensure we have a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and the strengths in each area. These will also be key for the ongoing scrutiny of the improvement work by providing the Select Committee detailed understanding of the impact on frontline practice for these areas. The following audits are currently in progress and can be reported to the Select Committee in early 2021 if requested:
- Following the mock inspection of CWD in August 2020 further thematic work will be undertaken (October to December 2020)
 - Supervision – led by the Principal Social Worker (to begin October 2020 and will be ongoing on a quarterly basis)
 - Connected Person/SG (October/November 2020)
 - Re-audit on permanency and pathway plans (November/December 2020)

Long Term Impact of Covid-19 on Future need for Children's Services

38. Work has been ongoing to understand the likely impact of Covid-19 for the next 12-18 months for our frontline teams in Children's Services. This has involved data modelling work within a wider framework of recovery planning for the directorate. To compliment council-wide operational responses and the Local

Resilience Forum (LRF) structures in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, a set of workstreams were established in the summer within Children's Services to focus on returning service delivery to normality as far as possible.

39. In addition, we have undertaken data modelling to understand likely demand increases on our services and are holding multiple workshops with VCFS (Voluntary, Care & Faith Sector) partners to discuss how best we can meet the challenges over the next year.
40. As reported above in paragraphs 11-13, we have seen demand increase dramatically across almost all services with referrals increasing by over 30% since February, children subject to Child Protection Plans up 15% and over 100 children coming into the care system in the last 3 months alone. If this increased demand continues then it will inevitably impact our ability to keep to timescales and ensure we're able to support all of our children and families in the way they deserve. Risks around staffing levels – particularly with the heightened risk of illness and related absences over the winter months – are at the forefront of our contingency planning.
41. We will continue to take a pragmatic and risk-based approach when making decisions on service delivery and this will always put children and families first.

Conclusions:

42. Covid-19 continues to have a significant effect on the day-to-day work across children's services – in the increases in demand and workload coming into the service, the challenges we have around staffing compounding the workload issue and the practical difficulties in delivering frontline services during a pandemic. Despite this we are continuing to fulfil our statutory safeguarding obligations however the impact cannot be underestimated and as the situation continues we are likely to see the quality and timeliness of social work practice deteriorate further.
43. The challenges related to the pandemic are at a time when we are in the middle of a major transformation and improvement programme in Surrey. This cannot stop due to it's importance in improving services and we are anticipating a full re-inspection from Ofsted in 2021 – it does however mean that we may need to prioritise our efforts across the improvement work-streams.
44. Quality assurance across children's services is highlighting some frontline services where we're still seeing too much 'inadequate' practice so we are renewing our efforts on tackling the underlying issues and supporting social workers, managers and service leaders to focus on the impact for children and families.

45. Further detail on the content of the report and the attached annexes is available if required along with information regarding the actions being taken by the service.

Recommendations:

46. The Select Committee acknowledges the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, the risks highlighted in this report as a result of these challenges and the actions being taken to continue focussing on deliver of frontline services.
47. The Select Committee notes the overall findings and feedback from the recent quality assurance activity included in this report and the impact on frontline children's services resulting from delivery of the Children's Improvement Plan.
48. The Select Committee receives a further report in the spring 2021 – to include an update on the children's improvement activity and the continued impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the response from Surrey's children's services

Next steps:

We are expecting a short 'Focussed Visit' from Ofsted between January and March 2021 however dates cannot be confirmed to the Committee as this will be an unannounced visit. Although the national restrictions in place from 5 November 2020 have led to Ofsted pausing all Focussed Visits until the New Year, at the time of writing this report the service is still expecting a Focussed Visit to take place by March 2021.

Oversight and scrutiny of the improvements to children's services will continue to take place at the Surrey Safeguarding Children's Partnership (Executive group) and the Corporate Parenting Board as appropriate.

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Sources/background papers:

- Children's Improvement Update – [Item 5 at the 28 July 2020 meeting](#) of the Children, Families, Lifelong Learning & Culture Select Committee

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