

Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership (SSCP)

Annual Report 2021/22

Comment of the Independent Chair & Scrutineer – Simon Hart

1. Background

The arrangements to create a (local) Safeguarding Children Partnership are set out in Statutory Guidance, Working Together 2018, and Chapter 3 and include the requirement for Statutory Partners to provide an annual report based on the effectiveness of safeguarding activity in the locality. The guidance requires Safeguarding Partners to agree arrangements for independent scrutiny of the report, and in Surrey this duty is currently placed with the Independent Chair and Scrutineer.

This short report therefore represents my view of the SSCP Partners Annual Report covering the period 2021/22. Given the reporting timetable to the Health and Wellbeing Board, I have taken the opportunity to make a small number of further comments based on the continued progress of the Partnership's work.

Members of the Health and Wellbeing Board will be aware that last year I felt it necessary to comment in some detail due to the first Annual Report of the Partnership being focused on the establishment of governance arrangements and particular priorities such as the recovery of case review activity. However it is clear that for the period 2021/22 the Annual Report offers a much stronger commentary on activity which has impacted on practice and the experience of young people and their families. It is especially reassuring that the Annual Report is balanced and explicit about progress being made, challenges which remain and how they will be addressed.

This allows a somewhat more succinct scrutiny comment.

2. SSCP Arrangements and Governance

Nevertheless, Safeguarding Partnerships across the country remain relatively new and are maturing, in which case the embedding and stability of sound governance arrangements remains important. It is also necessary that the positioning of safeguarding partnerships within wider local strategic partnering arrangements is well understood, linked with other strategic Boards and included in the consideration of the emerging Integrated Care System.

In Surrey the role, function and purpose of the Partnership is clear and strategic priorities are set out in the published 'Arrangements' document and Annual Report. The Partnership's strategic priorities are aligned to a particular work stream and assigned to a formal Sub- Group, chaired at senior level and accountable to the Executive.

Priorities are regularly monitored through a Business Group and are broadly on track with any delay being accountable and well managed. The senior leadership arrangements help ensure that drift does not occur.

Inevitably over time there has been some change in membership across all elements of the SSCP Governance structure. However changes have been well managed and partners have maintained a commitment to provide representation able to sustain continuity and experience in safeguarding.

The Partnership has maintained a healthy discipline in its focus on agreed priorities but has also been sufficiently adaptable to give time and attention to new challenges as they have arisen.

It is particularly noteworthy that over the course of the last year, the Forums which cover the safeguarding interests of extensive partnership networks have developed and matured well. These groups include:

- District and Borough Councils' Safeguarding Forum
- Health Safeguarding Forum
- Schools and Education Safeguarding Forum
- Third Sector Safeguarding Network

They have become an important means of enabling those networks to be influential in the development of, and challenge to, safeguarding strategy and practice in Surrey. This was always an important aspiration when the partnership was first established in 2019 and is now being realised.

Within the annual review of Governance the partnership continues to ensure that work streams are closely aligned to strategic priorities. A welcome development this year has been the creation of the Emerging Issues Group which is to ensure that the partnership is sighted and able to respond strategically to risks and issues emerging across the safeguarding network, to review policy, strategy and protocols. The Group will focus over the coming year on the Partnerships response to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

However I would also like to recognise the benefit of the regular meeting of District & Borough Lead Members and Officers for Children's Services, which meets regularly to both share information and focus upon local safeguarding activity within District and Borough Councils throughout Surrey. This meeting is led by the statutory Lead Member for Children's Services and has illustrated significant innovation and commitment to safeguarding at a local level.

The Partnership continues to consider ways in which safeguarding can develop as a consistent theme throughout wider governance arrangements in Surrey and currently there is an appropriate focus on the role and function of the Integrated Care Board (ICB). In this regard regular programmed liaison is taking place involving the Independent Chairs of both safeguarding children and vulnerable adults

partnerships, along with the Independent Chair of ICB and also the chair of the Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Improvement Board. To this end the SSCP has continued to support the Mindworks Reference Group which has a particular purpose to ensure that significant medium term planning, intended to transform mental health services, remains grounded in current practice .

The partnership also continues to develop increasingly effective communications through use of a developing website, regular bulletins and briefing sessions and has also delivered its first major safeguarding conference –all of which is intended to enable stronger understanding of the Partnerships contribution to safeguarding and how it may be accessed and used.

Importantly I have continued to have good access to Executive Leadership and also Political support through the Leader and Lead Member of Surrey County Council. This has been especially beneficial in raising the profile of safeguarding risk in relation to emotional wellbeing and mental health and indeed the strategic challenges faced by all partners in relation to recruitment and retention. It has also been helpful to develop my understanding of the financial pressures under which public services currently operate and the potential impact upon safeguarding.

Overall the arrangements and governance of the partnership are well managed and developing appropriately.

3. Evidence of impact, strategic priorities and outcomes for children and families

In this section of the report I was pleased to see the level of candour setting out both progress and very clearly those areas of activity that require more attention. I agree with the conclusions reached by the statutory partners in the report.

The report also illustrates the findings of external inspections and reviews which is a significant development in the partners forming a view about the collective impact of safeguarding arrangements and how they may collaborate to inform more corporate approaches to improvement and safeguarding.

It is unfortunate that this paid insufficient attention to Children's Homes

However the report offers a balanced view of progress alongside areas for improvement in relation to, Early Help, Resilience, and Neglect. The report also rightly highlights the lack of consistency within the child protection process and uses the findings of local case review activity as a driver for change and improvement.

Without repeating the narrative of the Annual Report, it clearly confirms those areas of work that are currently underway, comments on achievement and pace of change and sets out clear signals of those areas of activity where more work is required.

Subsequent to this reporting period the SSCP has considered the findings of the Government's Independent Review of Children's Social Care, and partners have agreed an approach to developing multi-agency teams concerned with Family Help and this may well represent a timely opportunity to strengthen collaboration at both practice and strategic levels. It will be important to monitor the commitment to this work and its potential impact.

In relation to engagement with young people and their families the partners are clear that this is best achieved through services that are developed to be inclusive and engaging. The Annual Report shows good evidence of this approach alongside evidence achieved through the formal safeguarding audit processes. However partners also recognise that there are circumstances where direct contact through the Partnership is beneficial and have been thoughtful in using such approaches.

4. Recruitment & Retention and Workforce Development

The Annual Report recognises continuing pressure in relation to recruitment and retention which is prevalent throughout the Partnership and seen as a significant potential risk to safeguarding. In recognising the problem the statutory partners have agreed to collaborate in an analysis of the problem and this work is currently sponsored by the Chief Executive of the County Council. It will continue to feature in the scrutiny of SSCP and indeed is a key theme in the Childrens Social Care Transformation and Assurance Board.

In relation to training and workforce development this Annual Report relies heavily on the narrative of the Surrey Children's Workforce Academy. The commentary is largely positive and it is reassuring to see that partners appear generally satisfied with the training offer and the quality of delivery. In particular the multi-agency safeguarding training offer is appreciated and is seen as a helpful supplement to single agency practice development.

However over the past 3 years the SSCP has seen little evidence of the impact of safeguarding training by means formal evaluation and this remains a concern to the Executive and Partners.

However following revisions to the Academy management arrangements including the appointment of a new Academy manager steps are being taken to formally recognise the need to bolster the identification of training needs analysis, alongside arrangements for commissioning and delivery.

5. Resourcing the Partnership

The Annual Report clearly sets out the financial resource base for the Partnership, which despite financial pressures within funding agencies has been maintained.

However alongside this financial commitment there remains a significant commitment from Partners to ensure that the Governance arrangements are given the time and support they need to work well. To that end agencies such as Health, Surrey Police and Surrey County Council have additionally funded particular pieces of work but all Partners have also ensured strong and consistent support and attendance for all formal meetings and work streams. This has continued to enable a far stronger 'ownership' of safeguarding responsibility at a partnership level.

6. Conclusion

The Annual Report gives a detailed and balanced account of the Partnerships activity of the period 2021/22 alongside a positive message of consolidation. The 'Arrangements' are well led by the Strategic Partners and supported by other Partners who are becoming more influential in sharing responsibility for safeguarding and driving change.

The Partnership Team is maturing and despite recent changes in personnel, provides good support to partnership activity and increasing challenge, albeit increased engagement in scrutiny activity is needed.

Particular strengths emerging during 2021/22 include:

- The continued commitment to support and engage with children, young people and their families
- Governance arrangements that have been sustained in difficult circumstances and which are largely effective and extending partnership influence
- Consolidation of case review activity and increased focus on impact of learning
- The sustained drive on improvement with particular reference to Emotional Wellbeing & Mental Health and offer to Gypsy, Roma & Travelling Communities with increased emphasis on corporate responsibility
- A renewed focus on Family Help

Immediate challenges to safeguarding young people in Surrey include;

- Managing the gap between levels of need and capacity
- Mitigating the impact of the difficult recruitment and retention landscape
- Maintaining momentum in the improvement of Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Services for young people

- Improving consistency in multi-agency practice at a pace that is swift but sustainable

Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the contributions of all frontline practitioners and their managers in supporting families across the entire safeguarding network in Surrey. Working in the realms of vulnerability and child protection remains highly unpredictable and challenging, with practitioners sometimes having to function in quite isolated situations. As reported last year practitioners coped admirably with the consequences of COVID-19 and are currently preparing for different challenges associated with an emerging cost of living concern. This merely serves to emphasise their commitment and resilience for which we are deeply grateful.

I look forward to being able to report on continued progress over the coming year.