

Interim Report of the Non-Executive Commissioner for Children's Services

Surrey County Council

16 May 2019

Trevor Doughty

Children's Services Commissioner for Surrey County Council

- 1.1 I was appointed non-executive commissioner for Surrey County Council following the Ofsted Inspection carried out under the Single Inspection Framework between 26 February and 22 March 2018. The report was published on 16 May 2018. Ofsted rated Surrey's children's services 'Inadequate'. Following consideration of the report, the Secretary of State concluded that the Council is failing to perform to an adequate standard for some or all of the functions to which Section 497a of the Education Act 1996 is applied by Section 50 of the Children Act 2004 (Children's Social Care functions). On 25 June 2018 I was appointed Commissioner for Children's services in Surrey. My primary focus as the Commissioner is the 'presumption test', that is "In cases of persistent or systemic failure, children's social care services will be removed from local authority control for a period of time in order to bring about sustainable improvement unless there are compelling reasons not to do so".
- 1.2 In reporting to the Minister as part of my recommendations I said the following.

"It is too early to make a secure judgement about whether the steps that have and are being taken will bring about sustainable improvement in the effectiveness of children's social care services in Surrey. The Council now recognises and accepts the depth and complex nature of the issues it faces in children's social care. It has appointed a sector leader as the Director of Children's Services and a Chief Executive who understands the challenge and how to support her DCS and what to look for. However, it is too early to expect the improvements required to rectify the deep and long-standing problems identified by Ofsted and confirmed by my review. Given the clear intention of the Council and significant resources allocated to the task, at this early stage I do not believe that taking the Service out of the control of the Council will accelerate progress, rather that it could serve as a distraction to the considerable efforts of the DCS to make the necessary improvements. It is for these reasons, I recommend that the Minister allows the Council a further 12 months to demonstrate that the action plan it has put in place is working. It is particularly important that there is continuity in an ongoing dialogue to monitor improvement in addition to the monitoring visits by Ofsted. I would, therefore, also recommend that Commissioner

oversight should continue with further reviews and assessment of progress against the findings of this first review in around 6 and 12 months. In my view this would strike a proper balance between concern arising from the previous 'false starts' and an acknowledgement of the recent but palpable change in the attitude and approach by the Council to bring about sustainable improvement."

- 1.3 This report is to give an interim view on progress in Surrey County Council Children's Services and will be followed by a further report in around 6 months time.
- 1.4 In preparation, the methodology has been as my previous report. During the first two weeks in April 2019 senior managers and practitioners from Cornwall were engaged on my behalf. Prior to visiting the authority they reviewed performance data, reports and the new structure. On site in Surrey they met with senior managers and practitioners across Children Services, held focus groups for managers and practitioners, met with partners and audited around 40 cases. They were made welcome by the County Council and their partners and staff and managers were found to be open and candid in their response to the visit. I followed up by meeting senior managers and senior members to share the findings of my staff's visits and to gauge initial response. It should be emphasised that there is a rapid pace of change in Surrey and my interim findings are based on visits in early April and further work will have occurred in the weeks since and will be taken into account in my further report later in the year.
- 1.5 In my original report I emphasised the deep seated and long term nature of the problems in Surrey Children Services and it is unreasonable to expect to find clear evidence of improvement in the lives of vulnerable children at this early stage. However, clear signs that the fundamental structural and cultural issues are changing for the better should be reasonably expected.
- 1.6 Following my appointment as Commissioner, the Authority at senior member and officer level emphasised their change in attitude and recognition of the depth of the issues and the Council's determination to address them. Over the past several months this commitment has been demonstrated and there is now

substance behind the claim. There has been investment and together with significant change at both member and senior officer level demonstrating that the Council has prioritised Children Services improvement.

- 1.7 Senior managers appointments have been made at impressive pace which means leadership and responsibility is now more distributed and there is no longer the over dependence on the DCS.
- 1.8 Police no longer led the multi agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Plans are in place to move to a new model for the front door with a contact centre, safeguarding hub and an early help hub. They will move out of the police station to a building where they will all work together on one floor. Police are screening and triaging their own work, referrals through to the present MASH have reduced considerably and are more appropriate but need further work. Commitment and resource from the police to make this happen is in place. This is impressive progress though at the time of the visit decisions were all still not being made within 24 hours in order for full Working Together compliance.
- 1.9 There has been rapid progress in improving the quality of data which has, in turn, underpinned the introduction of a performance management system that can give senior managers confidence in understanding and interpreting quality of practice. That practice is not yet at the consistent standard required but the building blocks are now in place for such improvement to take place.
- 1.10 Case auditing and management oversight has been established and is beginning to embed itself in the operation of the organisation. Supervision is still a long way from being consistently reflective and effective but the structure is now in place and the expected standard being made clear. The combination of performance management, oversight of practice and expectations of practice standards are beginning to shift the management culture to one of quality and learning.
- 1.11 The family resilience model together with practice standards have been introduced and though these will take time to be fully

established and understood, the leadership has taken the right steps in giving this early priority.

- 1.12 There is still a considerable challenge facing the authority but senior managers are fully aware of the priorities. There are particular issues in the North East area and these were still evident at the beginning of April 2019 but I am assured further work and appointments have improved the performance since then and I will come back to that in my next report.
- 1.13 One of the most serious effects of the long term problems is that an atmosphere of constant and overwhelming pressure on Social Workers has led to a culture of finding expedient solutions rather than the first priority being "how can I best help the child and family?" The reform of the front door, the family resilience model and the overall performance management are aimed at delivering a proper child centred approach but this will take time and identifying further evidence of culture change will be part of my next review in the Autumn.
- 1.14 My team were impressed that despite the magnitude of change and some necessarily difficult restructuring and HR processes, morale amongst staff is positive and there is overall confidence in the improvement journey.
- 1.15 There is still work to be done in establishing the confidence of partners. The authority is fully aware of this and some progress has been made and the Ofsted Priority Action Board is making this a priority.
- 1.16 Much has been done and much remains to be done. When an authority has had failing Children Services to this extent, it is a challenge for senior managers to prioritise the many issues that need addressing. There has been a concentration on improving social work particularly at the 'front door' and this is understandable. The early help offer and the crucial place of early help in making vulnerable children safer remains to be established and must now be a priority.
- 1.17 The authority has made rapid and solid progress since I submitted my original report. It is important to emphasise that this is from a

starting point of seriously failing services and there is still some way to go before there is clear evidence that vulnerable children and their families are being better served. Nonetheless, I can give a positive message on the Council's progress and the effectiveness of the leadership that has been put in place. I will report again in 6 months but I am able to commend the progress that has been made whilst continuing to emphasize the magnitude of the task.

Trevor Doughty
Commissioner for Surrey's Children's Services

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