

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

**Surrey County Council**

**20 December 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 I submitted my interim report to the Minister on 16 May 2019 and the interim conclusion was as follows

"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."

- 1.4 This report is my final submission following the 12 month review I undertook to complete in my first report.

- 1.5 The methodology has been as in my previous two reports. In November 2019 Senior Managers and practitioners from Cornwall Council completed on site visits auditing around 40 cases meeting with senior practitioners, managers and partners as well as holding focus groups. They were made welcome by the County Council and partners and as in the previous two visits, all staff and partners were open and candid. I met with the DCS and senior Members and managers following the visit to give feedback on the findings.

- 1.6 People and Leadership

In my initial report I emphasised the dependence and reliance on the appointments of a new Chief Executive and DCS with strong and established reputations. In my interim report I noted that senior appointments had been made at an impressive rate and leadership and responsibility was therefore more evenly distributed and there was no longer over dependence on the DCS. There is

now sufficient capacity at middle manager level to provide quality assurance of practice and this can be seen in case audits where managers had identified practice that required improvement.

#### 1.7 Help and Protection

Over the last 12 months there has been good and rapid work to put in place a structure, management team, quality and performance management arrangements that have the compacity and drive to address the long-standing systemic failures in helping and protecting children and families in Surrey. There has been significant investment in the resources available to the service.

There are clear signs that performance and quality of practice are improving. Appropriate systems are in place. It is obviously important that the Council maintains the focus and energy on using the arrangements to deliver the stated vision of multi-disciplinary working and evidence base practice.

#### 1.8 Children in Care and Care Leavers

Corporate parenting is developing well with a strong lead from members and the chair of the board. It is recognised that there is further work to do with partner membership and representation of young people. Children are being seen and plans undertaken and this has been the primary focus with further work to do around the clarity of the service methodology. The commitment of managers is clear. The numbers of children placed out of County remains high and the Council is aware of this and plans are in place to reduce those numbers but this will take time and continued effort to make a significant impact. Initial health assessments have improved considerably and the virtual school has been remodelled with a positive impact on Personal Education Plans anticipated but yet to be delivered.

#### 1.9 Front Door and Early Help

The improvements to the front door outlined in my interim report have continued and there has been strong investment on training in the resilience model which has been cascaded to partners and has been well received. New arrangements are in place for contact and referral with the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) being replaced by a Children's Single Point of Access (CSPA). The introduction of the new threshold document "Levels of Need" has

been positively received by practitioners and managers and there is evidence this has lowered caseloads. The Early Help Hub has moved to new premises which has been a significant improvement. Morale seems high and the newly appointment Early Help Hub Manager is very positive with a clear grip on process and vision for the direction of travel. The closure and recommissioning of Children Centres now Family Centres working across ages 0 -11 is mostly completed. However the Early Help offer is not always clear to partner agencies or social work teams and the challenge remains to make it fully understood and effective.

#### 1.10 Quality Standards/Workforce Development and Safeguarding Partnership

There has been impressive and rapid improvement in terms of quality assurance overall. The quality assurance service and team have a clear understanding as to why QA is in place and how it drives service improvement. It is reassuring that the quality assurance and performance systems which have been given priority in underpinning service development, are delivering honest and thorough audits and performance reports giving senior managers a clear measurement of progress. There is evidence of culture change with the lived experience of the child being more evident. Practitioners and Practice Supervisors can go beyond compliance and can articulate the learning that arises from audits. Audits are used to reflect on practice. The CP Chair and the IRO service has reviewed data and practice throughout the year and produced a comprehensive report outlining various aspects. The service is a good example of how data has prompted enquiry and changes to service delivery. The performance data available to the whole service is comprehensive. It is relevant, well-presented, and flexible. Anomalies are picked up and there are now clear routes for interrogation, with an expectation that data will inform performance and practice. Practice supervisors have reported very favourably about "Tableau" and authentically discussed how they use it in their daily business and to challenge and use it in supervision.

The new Safeguarding arrangements are in place and are being implemented in compliance with the 2017 Act. The independent Chair and Scrutineer provides strong and inclusive leadership and scrutiny. This is matched by a strong and positive lead from the

decision-making executive and reflects a genuine partnership approach. The new partnership forum structure which allows involvement and discussion has been well received. The business support function is working well. Some education partners however, continue to voice frustration and it is important their concerns are listened to and responded to. Multi agency training is largely effective but there are some reports of variability of quality.

#### 1.11 Conclusion and Recommendation

In my recommendations to Surrey County Council in my report of 19 September 2018 I highlighted ten issues for the Council to address. Significant progress has been made in all ten areas. That report was very stark in setting out the long term and systemic failures in Surrey which were still very apparent at the time of the report submission. Progress has been impressive and there is clear evidence of practice improvement and cultural change. Staff morale is good and they report a positive working environment. The introduction of performance management processes and quality standards based on sound data has been particularly impressive. There is now a clear expectation of what is required to staff linked to an understood social work model. There is still variability across the four quadrants but consistency must improve along with an overall rise in standards. The North East area has moved to high quality accommodation and is no longer as seen as the poorest performing area and indeed, in some areas, is leading the way in terms of improvement.

Of course there is still much work to do and maintaining pace will be a significant challenge but the authority has come a long way in a short time in terms of improving services to children, young people and families in Surrey. The political support has been consistent and delivered on the promises made when the authority went into intervention. The senior management team is strong and the authority has demonstrated a commitment to improving and prioritising children services.

As this is my final report as Commissioner, I am now in a position to make a clear recommendation. There has been significant improvement identified in the two follow up reviews undertaken by Cornwall Council staff. This view is shared by the published Ofsted Monitoring Visits. My view is that sustainable improvement is

underway in the Authority and that an alternative delivery model no longer needs to be a consideration.

I would like to thank Surrey County Council and partner agencies for their openness and co-operation in my work as Commissioner.

Trevor Doughty  
Commissioner for Surrey's Children's Services

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