

CABINET MEMBER OF THE MONTH: Clare Curran, Cabinet Member for Children & Families
SPOTLIGHT: 'Getting to Good'

The children's services improvement programme is embedding new ways of working to ensure significant and sustainable improvements to children's services, so that all children in the county and their families receive the right help at the right time and that families thrive and children achieve their full potential. This system change is being achieved through a partnership approach, working with police, health, schools, the third sector and the community through the Surrey Safeguarding Children's Partnership.

Our approach is to prioritise early intervention and prevention and to keep an unrelenting focus on driving up the quality of our frontline practice and forging strong relationships with children, young people and their families.

Ofsted Monitoring - Following the Ofsted inspection in 2018 where our children's services were judged to be inadequate, there was an urgent need for cultural change and much has been achieved in improving the services provided since then. This progress has been recognised by Ofsted during their regular monitoring and assurance visits. The most recent monitoring visit took place in September, in relation to Care Leavers. Overall, the inspectors identified sound work across all domains of young people's wellbeing and examples of good practice - particularly highlighting our support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. A full Ofsted inspection is expected in 2022 and we are working hard to ensure that the improvements to our services are sustained and the judgement significantly improved.

Early Help/Family Resilience - We know that providing early help and support is more effective in promoting family resilience than reacting later. Effective early help means providing support as soon as a problem emerges, at any point in a child's life, from the foundation years through to the teenage years and should be an activity undertaken by almost everyone who works with children, young people and their families, wherever that may be. The Children's Single Point of Access (C-SPA) and the Early Help Hub have transformed the way, as a partnership, we respond to requests for support. Together they ensure that the needs of families are more quickly triaged and allocated to targeted services, if needed, or signposted to services in the community that can provide help. As part of this approach we have also implemented changes to our Family Centres and refreshed the Family Information Service, which provides a directory of support services available in the community [Family Information Service - Surrey County Council \(surreycc.gov.uk\)](https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/family-information-service).

Our Family Safeguarding Model of social work for child protection aims to help parents tackle the challenges in their lives that get in the way of their parenting and of their ability to keep their children safe from harm or neglect. This model of practice brings together into one multidisciplinary team all the professionals needed to help children and to support families. This includes specialist adults' workers with domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health expertise alongside children's social workers. The workers in the team develop a plan together with families that builds on their own strengths and supports and enables them to make changes so that children can safely remain at home. Across Surrey, we have 22 Family Safeguarding Teams working with more than 1,800 children. The recognition of neglect and the response to children experiencing neglect across services are areas requiring further improvement, as this continues to be the most common category of harm for children subject to child protection plans in Surrey.

Launch of Mindworks Surrey (the Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Service for children): We are keenly aware that more young people are struggling with their mental health and wellbeing following the pandemic. Our newly commissioned alliance of NHS, national and local voluntary organisations, to support emotional wellbeing and mental health has led to the launch of 'Mindworks Surrey'. The emphasis is on early intervention and prevention and on giving children and young people a central voice in decisions about their care. Our children and young people were instrumental in co-producing the new child-friendly website www.mindworks-surrey.org, which is a source of essential information, including how to ask for help in a crisis via the 24/7 Crisis Line. It also features a dedicated area for professionals including schools and GPs.

Looked after Children - We are ambitious for our looked after children and want to enable them to achieve the best possible outcomes in their lives. Securing homes for them in or near to Surrey plays a really important role in this, supporting children to remain connected to their own families and communities and progress successfully towards adulthood and independence. We aim to offer every child who comes into the care of the council the choice to remain in Surrey if that is appropriate for their needs. The

preferred placement for any looked after child is in a foster family in the community, but there are a small number of children, those with the most-complex needs, for whom residential care may be the best option. The report on the agenda today proposes specialisation of our children's homes to make residential care a specific intervention to address the needs of such children before they are stepped-down to family, or community-based care when their needs lessen. We are also engaging with providers to increase the availability of external residential provision in Surrey.

Fostering and adoption - Key to this approach is ensuring there are sufficient foster carers to meet the needs of Surrey children. We have continued to recruit skilled foster carers despite the difficulties of the COVID-19 Pandemic, and we are very pleased that recently there has been an increase in enquiries from people who would like to become foster carers. Strengthening our relationship with foster carers, adopters and other carers is key to ensuring that placements remain stable and that more children can remain in Surrey. We have introduced the Mockingbird model which helps to ensure carers and children have the extended family they need, lowers the risk of placements falling apart and allows foster carers to set up a home hub of around six to eight families providing a network of support to each other.

No Wrong Door - As part of our determination to focus on early intervention and in keeping with our ambition to keep children united with their families, we have invested in the No Wrong Door model: a well-evaluated short term residential model which 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 hub provides outreach and crisis support to enable young people to remain in their family home or to prevent a family breakdown. We provide very flexible support and accommodation if needed together with a 24/7 crisis response. No matter how diverse or complex, young people's needs are met within one team of skilled and trusted workers.

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Workforce - There is a comprehensive plan to develop our workforce strategy and improve our offer to potential and existing employees. This programme is seeking to identify the key issues and root causes affecting retention, address key concerns identified through feedback and insights and implement sustainable schemes that will enable improved employee experience. We have already seen a noticeable impact on our workforce with overall social worker staffing levels higher than last year (in May this year, they were at the highest since 2019 however this has reduced since July) and staff turnover rates reducing from 27% in January 2020 to 19.65% today. We do still have over 35 vacant social worker posts and a further 80-90 with locums in place of a permanent social worker; there is more to do in order to reduce vacancies and improve retention and further initiatives will be rolled out during the year. There is also an ambitious systems change programme, which will support the improvement of practice by enabling a single view of the child across multiple IT systems.

Covid-19 - Although services have continued to drive improvement, the pandemic has inevitably had a major impact on delivery of frontline services. This has been managed through detailed contingency planning, using additional funding to add capacity to the most affected teams in the short to medium-term, engaging the Surrey Safeguarding Children's Partnership and partner organisations to manage demand and supporting our hard-working and resilient workforce to ensure their safety while carrying out critical frontline services. The pandemic has had an impact on children and young people, especially on their emotional wellbeing. The economic impact of Covid-19 is also taking its toll on family resilience with more families struggling financially and under stress. At the same time, some partners, such as schools, and health providers are also struggling to cope and there is a significant impact upon the capacity of the wider children's system to meet the demand and need for their services.

We recognise that there is still more to do, especially in ensuring that practice is consistent across the County, set against increasing demands for services, increasing costs and budget pressures. We will continue to drive towards our objectives, ensuring that all children should have the opportunity to achieve their full potential.