

Children and Families Services - update

Reference Number: PAF/04/21

Report title: Children and Families Services - update	
Report to: People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee	
Report author: Graham Hughes, Senior Democratic Services Officer	
Date: 18 March 2021	For: Discussion and identifying any follow-up scrutiny actions
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County Divisions affected: Not applicable	

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This is a further update on Children's and Families services and projects incorporating challenges faced as a result of the pandemic.

2. Action Required

To consider the update and identify any follow-up scrutiny actions

3. Background

- 3.1 This item is further to the discussion in December 2020 (the minutes are attached as Appendix 1 to this report) with the Cabinet Member – Children and Families. The Chairman has requested a further detailed update focussing on four specific areas within Children's and Families services.

The following scope and advance key lines of enquiry have been submitted by the Chairman and Vice Chairmen to Councillor McKinlay, Cabinet Member – Children and Families.

Essex Child and Wellbeing Service

- (i) please confirm the finalised updated Key Performance Indicators that were agreed with Virgin Care;
- (ii) to what extent are they now outcomes-based?;
- (iii) how is impact being measured?
- (iv) what challenges remain in assessing and measuring performance in relation to them?
- (v) What are the current outliers (i.e. where not meeting thresholds set for a Key Performance Indicator) and what can be done about them?
- (vi) How is increased reach of this service being evidenced? And what aspects may still need further attention and improvement?
- (vii) Children's therapy services delivered in West Essex (commissioned by West Essex Clinical Commissioning Group) are also included in the contract – has there been any development in moving similar services delivered elsewhere in Essex into the contract?

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Respite Care

- (i) What is the impact of the pandemic on being able to provide these services at present? Are there aspects that just cannot be delivered at the moment? If so what mitigating actions can be taken?
- (ii) Can technology be used more to help foster improved relationships with parents and carers and perhaps deliver some services?
- (iii) What progress has been possible with the ongoing broad review of the service with parents and carers?
- (iv) Do you have a timetable in mind now to complete the review and any initial thoughts for change?

Domestic Abuse

- (i) What are the current trends?;
- (ii) how significant an impact has the pandemic been on current number of cases?
- (iii) How is the service managing pressures at the moment?
- (iv) What is being done to help safeguard those most at risk?

Looked-after children

- (i) What are the numbers coming into care and are there different patterns across different parts of Essex?
- (ii) Is there increased vulnerability for this cohort to exploitation by County lines and drug gangs?
- (iii) How difficult is it to find placements for these children?
- (iv) Who scrutinises decisions made on placements?

3.2 For all parts of the update the Chairman has asked that the following overarching questions are also addressed:

- (i) How have services adapted due to the pandemic?
- (ii) How are consistent services being maintained across the whole of Essex or are there particular circumstances that necessitates a differing service in places – if so, why?
- (iii) How are the most vulnerable still being supported at this difficult time?

3.3 The Committee has previously highlighted issues raised by parents and carers using respite services for children and young people. The Committee have had three separate discussions and updates on this issue with the most recent detailed discussion being on 18 June 2020 with a link to the minutes of that meeting here - [PAF 18 June 2020 minutes](#) .

3.4 The last time there was separate detailed discussion about the Essex Child and Family Wellbeing Service was on 27 June 2019. A link to the minutes of that meeting is here [PAF minutes 27 June 2019](#)

The minutes of the meeting on 27 June 2019 also include the first discussion on respite care referred to in 3.3 above.

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4. Update and Next Steps

- 4.1 Councillor Louise McKinlay, Cabinet Member – Children and Families, will be in attendance for this item.
- 4.2 See Appendices B and C for the update.
- 4.3 Next Steps are as in Action Required above

5. List of Appendices

- (i) Appendix A – Extract of the minutes of the virtual meeting of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held at 10.15am by video conference on Monday, 7 December 2020.
- (ii) Appendix B - Update from Councillor McKinlay, Cabinet Member – Children and Families, titled - Children Services Update for the People and Families Policy Scrutiny Committee, Thursday 18th March 2021.
- (iii) Appendix C – titled ECFWS – Performance data and KPI data.

Extract of the Minutes of the virtual meeting of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held at 10.15am by video conference on Monday, 7 December 2020

5. Children and Families Services - update

The Committee considered report PAF/28/2020 comprising an update on Children's and Families services and projects.

The following joined the meeting to introduce the item:

County Councillor Louise McKinlay, Cabinet Member – Children and Families;
Christopher Martin, Director – Strategic, Commissioning & Policy (Children and Families).

The Chairman expressed concerns about the late receipt of the advance written update. However, it was also acknowledged and appreciated that the service area had been focussing on and responding to recent extraordinary pressures.

During the discussion the following was acknowledged, highlighted and/or noted:

- Government guidance had permitted some relaxation of rules and the regulations. In practice the only aspect that significantly changed was the use of virtual visiting which had received positive feedback, particularly from young people.
- Throughout Covid, the Essex Child and Family Wellbeing Service (ECFWS) had maintained services, with some moved online and, when needed, face to face contacts had continued. Next steps were to review how ECFWS could link in more closely with childcare settings to give a much deeper and comprehensive offer.
- There had been an increase in lower level referrals to Family Solutions. Child Protection Plan rates had increased since the first lockdown.
- Whilst there had not been a significant increase in children and family cases within Essex, cases had become more complex as lockdown had restricted the ability to access support early. There had been several communications to raise awareness. In April 2022 changes in the law would mean ECC would have a statutory duty to make provision for victims of domestic abuse.
- A key family project was in Tendring which was looking at support required for individual needs and not just what was needed as a parent. Further funding was going into this project to try and identify new opportunities and additional resources, especially on drug, alcohol and domestic abuse. Successful elements from the project would be taken over to Canvey Island. It was intended that the project would be brought to scrutiny in the near future.

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The Working Families Programme had been adapted to respond to the pandemic. The summer camps were going to be expanded in terms of numbers of places and the geographical reach. More laptops could also be made available to vulnerable families.

- Additional Government funding was providing support to different groups although there were restrictions on how the money could be spent. Essex County Council was looking to combine targeting much of the support whilst also providing a comprehensive offer. The Essex Association of Local Councils were administering the funding to local communities. Members challenged the governance around community organisations receiving this funding. There would be an element of trust with providers but there was also a level of assurance from established working relationships and providers' own governance processes in place.
- Essex County Council were looking at how a broader respite offer and support for people could be provided, and how it could be linked with preparation for adulthood.

Conclusion:

It was agreed that a more detailed update would be scheduled in March 2021 with more information on the Virgin Care Children's Wellbeing Service and monitoring the KPIs in the contract as well as further developments on respite care.