

Northamptonshire Children's Services Commissioners' Report

Andrew Christie CBE and Clare Chamberlain CBE

June 2020

Contents

Overview	3
Service Improvement	4
Progress with the establishment of the Trust	6
Local Government Reorganisation	7

Overview

This report provides an update on our report of 20 February 2020 on improvement in Northamptonshire's Children's Services and the establishment of the Trust. In our report, we outlined our concerns on the timeliness of Trust establishment, originally due for a July go-live, stating that we would provide further advice on what a revised achievable timeline would look like.

Since our previous report, the nation has had to manage the pandemic of the COVID-19 crisis, which has understandably had an impact on all local authorities across the country. This has resulted in many local authority programmes being paused. We therefore felt it right to take the time to analyse the situation as it developed and gain a fuller understanding of what this meant for the establishment of the Trust and improvement of children's services in Northamptonshire.

We will address children's service improvement, the Trust and local government reorganisation in this order, referencing the impact of COVID-19 throughout.

Service Improvement

Our February report highlighted a substantial change in the senior leadership team that came about in October 2019, with the new leaders needing to establish a way of working and improve the services they inherited. This is so far proving successful, with the leadership growing in confidence and making changes to improve the services over this period. The unallocated cases remain at zero; the leadership team are at full complement and well embedded (although the Council is giving further consideration as to whether there is a need for additional capacity); agency numbers are decreasing; and managers throughout the organisation have more confidence in this new leadership team.

Oversight of individual team performance continues to improve and there is an enhanced understanding of the detail of cases with more streamlined processes in place. However, there is still some way to go and the impact of COVID-19 has created new challenges for the Service.

These improvements have been enabled by the significant additional investment that the Council has made in Children's Services both in the last financial year 2019/20, and in the Service's budget for this financial year 2020/21. The Leader, Lead Member, Cabinet and senior officers have quite evidently made the improvement of Children's Services one of the Council's highest priorities, demonstrated by the attention given to the matter as well as the additional investment made.

The Council's initial response to the COVID crisis was timely and focused. The leadership team know their service well, which put them in a strong position to quickly identify areas of risk and where to direct their energies. Staff sickness levels are low with as many working from home as possible.

Some examples of a positive initial response include:

- redeploying staff from low risk areas into front line safeguarding roles;
- redeploying staff working with adolescents in a social work role to the residential children's homes to create additional placement capacity; and
- close monitoring of performance data by the Assistant Director for safeguarding.

Social work teams' cases are RAG rated with high risk cases continuing to receive face to face visits and the remainder receiving telephone or video call contact to minimise risk of the spread of infection. Child Protection Conferences and Children in Care Reviews are now held virtually and contact between birth families and children is also virtual.

Importantly, the Council is working with Safeguarding Children Strategic Partners to highlight increased risks to vulnerable children as a result of self-isolation, lock down and social distancing, to ensure safeguarding responsibilities continue to be fulfilled and to co-ordinate agencies' responses during a time when some agencies have reduced staff capacity. Local multidisciplinary groups have been established to discuss and plan for children where there are concerns. The Partnership has also paid specific attention to the

risk of hidden harm for children in the community; and the role as “eyes and ears” to be played by local residents, all safeguarding agencies and those involved in the community resilience volunteer response.

Now we have been in this situation for a number of weeks, the Service seems calm and has settled into this new way of working. The Director for Children’s Services and her team are preparing for the next phase. It has been noted on the improvement plan where COVID-19 has had an impact, and we see them continuing to focus on improvement in the high-risk areas.

Recent data shows a 40% reduction in referrals, a slight increase in child protection caseloads (4%) and looked after children numbers relatively unchanged. The Council is aware and preparing for an increase in referrals when children return to school.

There has been lots of proactive and positive work carried out with schools, which has resulted in (at the time of writing) 13.9% of vulnerable children reported attending school out of the estimated number of vulnerable children on the school roll. This is above the England average of 8.4%. The County also has 93.5% of schools open, which provides significant opportunity for vulnerable children and children of key workers to receive the much needed support and safety-net that schools provide. These figures are the result of lots of hard work and consistent dedication, with particular credit to the Deputy Director for Education.

Last year, the Department for Education provided support to the Council for a number of urgent remedial actions - most importantly providing the time-limited assessment resource. This year we have worked with the Service to review their improvement plan and identify priority improvement actions and the additional support these may require. The Council has submitted this work separately and we support the priorities it identifies. We welcome the support the Department has provided and are grateful for the additional £1.5m envelope it is hoping to make available to support these priorities.

Progress with the establishment of the Trust

There has been some progress on the establishment of the Trust since our previous report. Following the appointment of Mr Ian Curryer as the Chair of the Trust, we have: appointed an interim Chief Executive; appointed four Non-Executive Directors with specific skills in children's social care, health, finance and commerce; appointed an interim finance director; appointed a programme manager; and continued to carry out key meetings with stakeholders, partners and Cabinet members, including the newly appointed 'Shadow' Leaders of the planned two unitary councils. The Trust programme team is starting to make some headway with specific workstreams on Trust establishment, including the headquarters for the Trust, establishment data to TUPE staff and development of a service delivery contract. Mr Curryer has also taken up his role as Chair of the Trust.

However, pace of work has still not been as quick as hoped and we recognised early this year that a July go-live date would be difficult to achieve, as referenced in our previous report. Prior to the COVID-19 escalation, we were in a position where our advice was that it would not be possible to establish a fit-for-purpose and sustainable Trust by July. Given the pace of work prior to COVID-19, we agreed with the Council that a July launch date would have been unachievable.

We had intended to recommend an early autumn launch; however, the Council's need to respond to the current COVID-19 situation has meant a necessary diversion of resource. As we are still in a position where we do not know how long we will remain in this situation, setting a date for an autumn go-live at this time would be overly optimistic.

We are still firmly of the view that the Trust is a critical part of service improvement and vital to ensure service stability during and immediately after the local government reorganisation. We, with the programme team, continue to make what progress we can at this point and are committed to launching the Trust as soon as possible; in advance of the local government reorganisation Vesting Day if possible, but otherwise by 1 April 2021.

A third option has emerged from the Council as a contingency plan, which is that children's services could be transferred temporarily to one of the new unitary authorities post-LGR. We would be extremely concerned that any such arrangement would be likely to create more uncertainty and instability for the Service; potentially jeopardising the progress being made to improve services.

The Department for Education provided funding last year to support the Council with work on the Trust and we welcome the additional £1.53m it is making available to the Council this year to support and progress Trust establishment.

Local Government Reorganisation

The postponement of the May 2020 local elections for a year due to the COVID-19 emergency will mean that from 11 May the membership of each shadow authority comprises all the existing county and district councillors in the shadow's area, with Councillor Ian McCord specified as Leader for the West Northamptonshire shadow authority and Councillor Russell Roberts specified as Leader for the North Northamptonshire shadow authority.

MHCLG Ministers' have stated that their firm intention is for the new unitary authorities to go live on 1 April 2021. Given the significant impact of urgent COVID response work on the unitary implementation programme, local leaders have agreed to focus on achieving a "safe and legal" transfer to ensure that vital services for vulnerable people will be delivered from that date, while accepting that wider transformation work might have to be undertaken post Vesting Day.

MHCLG Ministers have also agreed to keep unitary implementation under review to ensure that the safe transition of services on the target go live date remains viable. Officials have suggested firmer conclusions may be drawn in July. Any proposal for a change of vesting date will need to come forward by September, will require the unanimous agreement of all Leaders and the final decision will be subject to Parliamentary approval.

There is a clear link between the local government reorganisation (LGR) and the establishment of the Trust. The work being carried out on Children's Social Care Services currently within the LGR programme is focussed on these services moving to an external company – the Trust. Additionally, the work being done in the LGR programme on the Children's Service and Education functions that will remain with the two unitary councils is also very relevant for the future development of Children's Social Care Services in the County. It is to be welcomed that this is acknowledged by the Council.

Due to the scaling-back of work on the Trust programme because of COVID-19, Department for Education officials have agreed that some Trust resource currently funded by them can be redeployed to manage the Children's Services work in the LGR programme. We welcome this as it reflects the interdependence of the two programmes; reduces the risk of duplication of work; ensures a thorough understanding of LGR progress in relation to all of Children's Services; and means the Trust programme is better positioned to resume work at pace once the Council can release the necessary resource.

Following conversations between Commissioners, the Council and the Department for Education, and taking into account the above information on resourcing, the impact caused by COVID-19 and developments in the LGR programme, **we recommend a revised launch date for the Trust of early 2021**. However, if Trust establishment

cannot be safely achieved prior to Vesting Day, then it must be launched contemporaneously to (and certainly no later than) the LGR on 1 April 2021.

Due to the ongoing situation and the intrinsic link with the LGR, we will take into account any developments on its progress and timescales and keep you updated with any impact this may have on Trust establishment.

As always, we hope this information is helpful to you and are happy to discuss any of the above. We aim to provide our next update in September when Parliament returns after summer recess unless you request otherwise or something significant happens in the meantime.

© Crown copyright 2020

This publication (not including logos) is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

To view this licence:

visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3

email psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk

write to Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London, TW9 4DU

About this publication:

enquiries www.education.gov.uk/contactus

download www.gov.uk/government/publications