

Commissioner's progress report on children's services in West Sussex

**Progress report for the Secretary of State
for Education by John Coughlan CBE
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Council), Commissioner for Children's
Services in West Sussex**

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Introduction

- 1.1 This is the third Commissioner's Progress Report on the improvement of children's services in West Sussex County Council. This report continues to track what the Commissioner and the Improvement Partners in Hampshire County Council now regard as increasingly positive progress against the improvement plan, Ofsted's original recommendations from the main inspection in early 2019, and the recommendations of the Commissioner's first report in December 2019.

- 1.2 To support this report some additional appendices are attached. These include the more highlighted performance and intervention analysis that Hampshire County Council usually offers. There are also some examples of "Escalation Notes" which have been provided separately to present a more granular insight into the progress of case work for reasons explained below, especially with regard to improved responsiveness to criticism from WSCC staff and managers. There is also appended a copy of a letter from the Commissioner to Steph Brivio (Interim Director) which provides a more detailed explanation for a key aspect of this report, namely a recommendation that the work towards a children's trust for WSCC should be suspended for a period of up to a year initially. This is as reflection of the pace of progress being made and the need for resources and attention to be focussed on the continuing improvement journey, also and not least in the context of the Covid crisis.

Covid 19

2.1 In the previous update report we acknowledged the severe strain placed upon all concerned in West Sussex Children's Services in having the severe challenges of a children's improvement journey, with all that entails, in the context of having to manage the unprecedented crisis of the Covid 19 pandemic. The points made in that report continue to apply to do with: the adjustments to remote working generally; the particular dimensions of remote working when trying to supervise vulnerable children; the developing concerns for vulnerable children and domestic violence in the lockdown; the lack of intelligence from locked down universal services. This remains a crisis within a crisis. Obviously the course of the Covid crisis has continued to evolve rapidly since then, including with the Government's gradual relaxation of the national lockdown measures that applied in the Spring of 2020, through to the current period of introduction of more localised lockdown measures as authorities and communities attempt to manage what appears to be a second but regionally differentiated "second wave" of the virus transmission. It is helpful that in line with most of the counties in the South East, the rate of infection in West Sussex has not matched that of some regions and so there have been (at time of writing) no additional controls put in place that would exacerbate service capacity further.

2.2 In line with other authorities, WSCC experienced a relative reduction in contact and referral rates to children's services but these have since increased again to above average levels in line with the re-opening of universal children's services, especially schools. However, in view of what we know about the profile of typical activity in an authority seeking to recover from failing services, it is difficult to be precise about the extent to which changes in referral rates are due to the impact of the virus or the initial improvements to services and access. Trying to assess that issue in more detail at this stage is probably a futile exercise, other than to stress that the matter will remain under close collective scrutiny, especially with regard to ensuring capacity and services are being managed as safely and effectively as feasible.

2.3 In terms of immediate impact on service delivery, and especially on child safety, all of the indicators suggest that staff and front-line managers are managing their supervision of children and responsiveness to referrals relatively well in the Covid circumstances. As elsewhere, social workers are working more remotely including with some direct contact with children and families being conducted via technology. The County Council has sought to prioritise the equipment and technical support needs of children's social services during the crisis. They should be commended for doing so but it also has to be noted that, in terms of equipment and software, the service has been operating from a low base because of poor investment decisions in previous years.

2.4 It is notable that senior managers in WSCC children's services have taken a proactive approach to supporting a certain degree of direct working arrangements, eg for occasional team meetings. More importantly, the impact of the response to the

pandemic on a set of fragile and unstable services as in West Sussex was a cause for major concern. In fact, as far as can be securely ascertained in mid-crisis, it appears the services have coped relatively well despite working in the context of “crisis on crisis”.

Arrival and impact of new Director of Children's Services

- 3.1 Lucy Butler took up post in April 2020 and so has only known her new authority in Covid conditions. It should also be remembered that to all intents and purposes Lucy represents the first "proper" DCS – in terms of role, scope and status – for over seven years. That is one measure of the extent of the task ahead.
- 3.2 That said, it would be hard to describe a more assured and effective introduction to the challenge than has been established by the DCS in the first six months. She has established herself with the authority politically and managerially. She has brought in new management support and made some key and very positive new appointments to her management team, while asserting her authority on the current interim senior management arrangements. Her combined experience and enthusiasm for the task is being noted by managers and staff and creating a sense of energy and direction that was previously lacking. One simple example is the most recent Improvement Board meeting that included external partners – a meeting which has struggled previously to achieve a balance between engagement and technical input. This most recent meeting was by far the most purposeful and focussed in its content and its tone, driven through the approach of the new DCS in a manner which must assure partners. Of course, this is only a meeting, but the sense of confidence and direction was palpable.
- 3.3 More critically to the task ahead, the DCS and her team are now making notable progress on the two key tasks of restructuring the department - to address the excessive tiers of management, and over complex children's pathways – and introducing and embedding a stronger practice framework. Both of these tasks will take time but are starting well. In particular, the DCS has quickly established a strong, honest and direct working partnership with the Hampshire DCS and his improvement team which bodes well for the attritional work of attacking continued poor and inconsistent practice.

General Performance Improvement

4.1 As stated above, there is appended to this report the usual more detailed performance assessment from HCC which offers a highlight analysis of both the scope and focus of the current improvement work but also an analysis of current progress being made in case practice across the service. In addition, for this report, the Commissioner has separately referenced two examples of “escalation reports” from Hampshire improvement managers. The escalation reports are used by those managers when they encounter specific case work concerns, whether through audit or other observations, where they see evidence of poor practice, management or decision making, which they judge in need of managerial escalation for both resolution and learning. Again, these serve to offer more practical illustrations alongside this report of the continued and inevitable practice weaknesses, but also now, more positively, the early evidence of better receptiveness in the services for evidenced criticism and owned change.

4.2 The headline messages from these varying sources of evidence, together with collective observations are as follows:

- Practice is improving but slowly and inconsistently. That is largely predictable given the state of the failings and the time so far.
- It is safe to assume that the challenges of Covid, while being well managed in the circumstances, will be an additional barrier to the pace of improvement.
- The underlying safety of the service is also improving with increasing quality of senior monitoring and oversight to ensure missed cases or concerns should be more readily spotted.
- Case work audit is increasing with Hampshire support but remains a relative novelty for some staff and teams and is not yet woven into the fabric of the day to day running of the service as it should be and eventually will be.
- Evidence from case audit supports Hampshire’s continuing contention that West Sussex has too many managers and not enough management. This is especially borne out by evidence of at best variable levels of evidenced case work supervision by front line managers, though that too is gradually improving. The quality of chronologies is a particular theme needing more collective attention.
- The MASH, as the crucial front door to services and safeguarding, is increasingly secure, with a number of developmental issues to be addressed which at least seem well appreciated by all concerned. These include: better and earlier work to triage contacts to referrals; further clarification and dissemination of service thresholds; a resolution of the police approach to assumed referrals for all child contacts; strengthening protocols for cases moving into assessment.

4.3 At time of writing WSCC had just been notified about a forthcoming Ofsted assurance visit to take place in late October 2020. This is a form of inspection tailored for the Covid circumstances and in this instance will also represent the monitoring visit that had been planned for May 2020. The DCS and her team will be focussed on the demanding preparation for this inspection and consequently we have paused the next Improvement Board meeting. The visit will be a significant test of progress so far and an invaluable “triangulation” of the judgements summarised in this report about pace of progress.

Corporate Progress

5.1 The pace of corporate change and progress since the last report has been sustained unabated. As outlined in the last report, WSCC has undertaken a radical set of corporate changes since the original intervention. That has included a new Leader and Cabinet including a new Lead Member for Children's Services. Children's Services is now a fully functioning and Children Act '04 compliant department including education services. The new Chief Executive fully line manages the DCS. That CEO is shared with East Sussex but that potential capacity challenge is far outweighed by the experience and abilities of the post holder. All of these changes are continuing to progress and are being enhanced now that the "proper" DCS is in post and being well supported by Chief Executive, corporate leadership and lead members.

5.2 As reported previously, the Chief Executive has initiated a full review of other aspects of corporate governance and organisational culture, in line with Recommendation 10 of the original Commissioner's report. That work is now reaching fruition with a major programme of cultural change now taking place following an externally driven "Refresh and Re-Boot" exercise. That is now being implemented through a "reset Plan" that is engaging the whole of the council. It is a significant undertaking but is exactly in line with Recommendation 10 of the original report.

Children's Trust – A Proposed Review

- 6.1 The Commissioner has recently written to the DfE's Director Improvement and Learning asking that consideration should be given to pausing the implementation of the recommendation for the establishment of a children's trust for West Sussex. This letter followed a series of informal discussions with the Director's immediate predecessor and other officials. That letter is appended to this report.
- 6.2 The letter speaks for itself and will not be repeated in detail here. The essence of the case for a pause is that the deeply unstable corporate conditions, which were the prime motivation for the original trust recommendation as those conditions were not conducive to sustained improvement for children, no longer obtain. The progress the council has made in these terms has been remarkable in its scope and speed and certainly beyond what could have been reasonably expected this time last year. Those changes include: a change of political leadership, including but well beyond the Leader; an overhaul and an opening up of the political culture; new and highly effectively officer leadership which has brought with it the additional support of East Sussex CC alongside that of Hampshire CC; a substantial review of corporate working (referenced above); the immediate resolution of the status of children's services through the establishment of a "compliant" children's services department; the appointment and arrival of a highly competent and effective DCS alongside a new and strong senior leadership team.
- 6.3 The Commissioner is now highly confident that the right corporate and strategic conditions are in place to a degree that could not have been foreseen twelve months previously. Of course, what remains to be done is the gradual, iterative and demanding improvement in practice and service delivery for children that must be at the heart of this enterprise. As this report indicates, there is increasingly solid evidence to show that those improvements are starting and should increase in pace – but it is also clear that there remain major challenges especially with regard to the consistency and pace of improvements. That is the challenge which should now be consuming the DCS and her incoming senior team.
- 6.4 The question now is not simply whether the original case to support a trust still obtains – the Commissioner's view is that it does not. However, more importantly for the progress of practice improvement, there has to be a question as to whether the next stage of establishing a trust represents a direct risk to the improvement journey. We are approaching a tipping point in the trust work with the imminent appointment of a chair together with a significant dedicated project team. It is clear that the resources and attention required, directly and indirectly, to service this next stage in the establishment of the trust will be significant. It is hard to conceive of this not being a substantial distraction for the council and especially the DCS and her team from the critical work of service improvement. The context of Covid only serves to underscore this argument.

6.5 The Commissioner recognises this is a significant change of direction and would not make the recommendation lightly. One option that has surfaced in the informal conversations is that rather than abandon the proposed trust it can be put on hold for circa a year during which time the rate of measurable service improvement can be a determining factor as to whether or not the trust is progressed.

Conclusion

- 7.1 This report has described continued strong progress in the organisational and strategic work which is a necessity for the overall improvement journey in WSCC Children's Services. The report also charts continued strong partnership working between HCC and WSCC in the developing focus on service and practice improvement. There is evidence to support those improvements beginning to show within the service, but there is no question that the improvements, such as they are, remain fragile and inconsistent. That should not be surprising especially given the size of the authority and the severity of the problems identified last year. We are now therefore into the stage of work which requires focus and determination by all concerned in order to achieve better practice.
- 7.2 It is primarily for these reasons, the excellent strategic and corporate response of the county council together with the need now for the director and her team to focus resolutely on service and practice improvement, that the Commissioner believes the option for a trust should now be put on hold.

Recommendations

8.1 It is recommended that:

1. This report is noted.
2. DfE endorses the continued direction of travel of the partnership between HCC and WSCC.
3. The proposal for the establishment of a Children's Trust for WSCC Children's Services should be paused, through the necessary technical means to suspend or change the Statutory Direction for a period of up to one year.

John Coughlan

Supported by Steve Crocker and Stuart Ashley

12 October 2020

Appendix 1

Highlight Report on Improvement Work to September 2020

1. As previously set out, the improvement work is being delivered through a number of workstreams based on the service area recommendations made to the Commissioner in the summer of 2019. These workstreams are now well established and run as projects reporting to the overarching programme manager and accountable to the Commissioner/DfE through monthly reporting.
2. The DCS has appointed permanent Assistant Directors to the posts of Corporate Parenting, Safeguarding & Quality Assurance, Social Care and Early Help. All of these are proven senior managers and all will take up post from October and November 2020. This will bring some much needed stability and consistency to the senior management team and will enable the DCS to drive improvements at the required pace.
3. The headlines of the service re-design now underway include:
 - New senior leadership team in place from the Autumn.
 - Work has commenced which will look at de-layering work to reduce the tiers of managers and ensure better line of sight to frontline practice.
 - Creating multi-disciplinary teams to include specialists such as domestic abuse workers and to clarify and simplify the “child’s pathway”.
 - Phased and trained introduction of a relationship-based model of practice.
 - Preventative focus to be on meeting families’ needs, rather than responding to abuse and family breakdown.
4. The Improvement Board has continued to meet during the Covid period and has effectively driven change within the council. That said, the wider partnership elements have been more challenging as new relationships are taking time to form and have been limited in their development thus far. In particular schools and the NHS have had competing priorities relating to Covid. The most recent partnership board meeting was by far the most effective so far.
5. The relationship between the two authorities is increasingly strong and there is a developing sense of trust between peer managers. The latter is particularly important to develop as on a few occasions a small number of West Sussex managers have struggled to accept the feedback and views of their Hampshire colleagues. This is not unexpected and is part of the improvement journey that West Sussex has embarked upon.

6. The Assurance Workstream provides the Commissioner with independent scrutiny and assurance that the Improvement Plan is making progress and agreed improvement actions are having a positive impact. The main activity undertaken in the last quarter has been the rolling remote audit of West Sussex case files by Hampshire managers. This is undertaken every three months and so far, two rounds of auditing have been completed and the third is now underway. The findings and recommendations from second round were shared with the Improvement Board in July 2020.
7. Supplementary reports which included a summary of findings from Children with Disabilities case file audits and a review of cases that have been escalated during audits due to safeguarding concerns have also been shared by HCC in the April and July 2020 Improvement Board respectively. The findings and analysis of the case file audits to date suggest that there are some areas where West Sussex are making gradual improvements in practice. Thresholds are more consistently applied in the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), assessments and reviews are increasingly and more consistently completed within statutory timescales as are visits to children and families. There is some increasing evidence of managerial oversight of practice.
8. However, as would be expected at this stage in the improvement journey there remain deficits in social work practice and management oversight remains inconsistent. Management oversight and supervision remain areas for urgent focus with compliance declining during the Covid period and the quality of managers' input lacking in analysis and reflection. Basic compliance with a number of core requirements remains poor and the voice of the child and the lived experiences of the child are not yet captured in a coherent or consistent manner. The proposed new practice framework will begin to address these issues.
9. The impact of Covid was evident in the decline seen in some areas including the recording of visits, but there has been a concerted effort to address this.
10. A number of cases were escalated to West Sussex during the auditing cycle as these were considered to require immediate or urgent action to ensure children were safe or receiving the service they required. West Sussex addressed each of the concerns and evidenced to Hampshire managers the actions they have taken and how lessons will be learnt. (See Appendix 2).
11. A detailed 6-month plan of future improvement work has been agreed with West Sussex, this will ensure there is work focused on the priority areas for improvement between October and March 2021.

Appendix 2

Commissioner's letter to Interim Director for Improvement and Learning, Children's Social Care, Department for Education

Dear Steph

West Sussex County Council - Children's Trust Direction

Firstly, congratulations on your recent appointment. We wish you every success in this vital role and I hope you know you can count on Hampshire County Council, particularly through Steve Crocker and myself, to offer you every possible support, both in what we do locally and nationally, but also in the field of sector led improvement.

We are about to meet and I understand the focus of that meeting will be on West Sussex (WSCC) and particularly my recent signalling to Victoria Chapman that I am no longer convinced the Direction to establish a children's trust in West Sussex, a direction made on my recommendation, is the right course for the council and especially children in the area. I thought it would be helpful in advance of our meeting if I tried to set out the basis for this possible change of direction.

You will be familiar with my original Commissioner's report published a year ago which made the recommendation. I would stress that that report was by far the most difficult I have written as a measure of the scale and depth of the problems in WSCC at that time. I stand by the need for the original recommendation which was based on our total and evidenced lack of confidence in the then corporate conditions to support improvement for children. The basis for a change of direction is not merely that the corporate conditions have improved, but they have done so evidently, securely and sustainably. I will outline how below, based around the headlines that led to the original recommendation.

Political Leadership and Culture

Without rehearsing too much damaging detail, the previous political leadership was closed and authoritarian. As well as being locked in a destructive and dysfunctional set of working relations with the senior officer leadership (no better illustrated than by the unusual direct contributions Leader and Chief Executive made to the Commissioner's report) that leadership had a fixed and fatalistic view about children's services – explicit statements were made that children's services had never done well in WSCC and so never would.

There was a change of Leader immediately after the report, but it would have been foolhardy to shift the Direction simply on that basis. However, since taking office the new Leader has, among other steps: overhauled the membership of Cabinet; opened up the Cabinet processes and meetings to enable a stronger democratic approach across the board; appointed a relatively inexperienced but highly credible and strong minded Lead Member for children; revived and strengthened the scrutiny arrangements including a more focussed and effective corporate parenting board; established a much more apparent cross-party commitment and confidence to children's services and improvement. The Leader and Lead Member have been extremely consistent in their support for the work of HCC and myself as the improvement partner and particularly receptive to the inevitable criticisms that come at the beginning of such a process.

Corporate (Officer) Leadership and Culture

I believe we were all (DfE, MHCLG and HCC) supportive of the model of a joint appointment to Chief Executive between East and West Sussex, but it would be fair to say that we all recognised there were risks attached given the scale of the task. There is no question that task has been at least as demanding as anticipated, but progress has been exceptional.

The CEO is established in post across both authorities and we are starting to see the benefits from this model of a "second improvement partner" as myriad forms of mutual support are being established between the two authorities without diminishing the independence of either. Crucially, this progress is having a meaningful impact on the deep-set organisational cultural issues described last year. There is no question that work is "done" – it will take some years. But progress has been substantial including through: a re-shaped corporate management leadership structure; new (if currently interim) leadership in adult social care (where we suspected comparable challenges to children's services); the painful but effective resolution of a number of service issues; and similarly for a number of significant outstanding personnel cases caused by the previous regime. All of this technical work is being backed by a substantial exercise in organisational cultural change ("Reboot and Refresh") which has been heavily committed to by the leadership and embraced by the wider organisation. This relates closely to Recommendation 10 of my original report which was fundamental to the Direction.

The Children's Services Department, the Director of Children's Services and Service Improvement

We were especially critical of WSCC's wilful failure of compliance with the legislation around the leadership of children's services, with a department that was deeply compromised by the narrowness of its role and status in the organisation and a DCS who

was in name only and next to no authority, status and confidence. The new corporate leadership moved swiftly to fix the position, by restructuring the role and the department with direct reporting to the CEO and organisational parity and authority in line with the legislative requirements. That technical work was done rapidly but it is the progress since which causes a reconsideration of the direction.

A new DCS has been appointed and has quickly established herself in post, enabled by the quality of her prior experience as a proven DCS of a large county. She has both taken some difficult decisions about some of the interim managers she inherited but more importantly has concluded the appointment of her senior team with a range of permanent appointments in whom HCC has high levels of confidence. There is a focus and calm confidence about the departmental leadership which had been severely lacking, and this is being reflected in a much more effective approach to the improvement work that HCC is overseeing.

Their work is by no means complete. We are now in the “hard yards” of iterative, gradual and demanding improving tasks especially across the range of case work. There is a departmental re-structuring under way to address the deep structural flaws of too many tiers of management and too complex a journey for the child across the services.

Indeed, it is the very nature and state of this demanding improvement work which contributes to the case against the trust Direction at this stage. The leadership capacity of the department is now much stronger but heavily committed to those demands of service improvement. If we proceed with the Direction, we will shortly enter the phase where, regardless of the extent of external specialist support to establish the trust, those same managers will be drawn into a series of activities which will be bound to distract from the key task in hand of service improvement. My concern now is that not only could the trust work slow that progress, it could actually reverse it during transition. Because there is no question that, while there is much work to be done, HCC officers (including myself) are seeing increasing evidence of increasing confidence and capacity in the front line services, and a receptiveness to criticism and change which did not previously exist.

So the dilemma we now face is that such has been the progress in the past year, the work required to establish the trust may not just be no longer required, it could represent a threat to sustained improvement, certainly in the short to medium term. There are some other factors which should be born in mind in this consideration.

Covid

Of course, Covid was not a consideration a year ago and it might be an arguable one now. But it should be acknowledged that the pace and scale of progress in WSCC children’s services has been largely against the back cloth of the pandemic and all the challenges it poses. The children’s challenges have been a crisis within a crisis. That has

to underscore the scale of the children's progress so far, achieved in this unprecedented context and with no apparent significant detriment to the progress. But as the pandemic continues with all of its demands on local government, that has to also further underscore the risks attendant to a trust project alongside that challenge when the imperative which caused the Direction has at least reduced.

Trust Benefits and Progress

I fully accept that in considering the possibility of changing the Direction it is important to acknowledge and consider the reason for the original recommendation and the benefits a trust would bring to WSCC. That also needs to include consideration of the progress so far to establish the trust.

We were clear throughout that the recommendation towards a trust was a firmly pragmatic one entirely based upon the well evidence concern that WSCC could not then provide conditions conducive to the sustainable improvement of children's services. The recommendation was not swayed one way or another by any point of principle in favour of an arm's length arrangement such as a trust. We particularly believed that the trust's governance would provide an organisational "buffer" against the extremes of the corporate problems which persisted at that time. Now that the need for that buffer has receded, the potential benefits of a trust are harder to define against the current service and performance progress being made.

Notably, the appointment of a strong DCS was in part contingent on the opportunity for that DCS to take the dual role of DCS and CEO of the trust. That was an important incentive to the appointment but now draws into question the need for a stand-alone organisation with shared council leadership. Conversely, we will also need now to appoint a CEO of the trust whose working relationship with a strong and able DCS would become a critical success factor – and one that is proving a challenge to existing trusts elsewhere.

A further attraction to the trust model was the potential for a "fresh start" for beleaguered staff. In fact, HCC's improvement work is revealing increasingly high levels of staff commitment to WSCC as they follow the improvement journey, and equally high levels of concern about the potential for disruption to staff out of the transition. This will be a particular threat given the current relative stability of staffing against the regional pressures. The transition now has the potential to be a destabilising factor.

The work to establish the trust has progressed reasonably well to date with a draft MOU prepared. However, we are now reaching a tipping point with the need to appoint a chair for the trust. That act is not exactly point of no return, but it would represent a milestone that should not be reached, because of the costs and efforts required, if we are not

unequivocally committed to the establishment of the trust. Frankly, as Commissioner, I no longer am, for the reasons outlined above.

Finance

That finally brings us to the question of finance. Establishing a fully functioning trust is a costly as well as complex task. Our understanding is that will come to at least £2 million, more probably closer to £4 million. That is a significant cost at the best of times, whereas public finances are still further stretched by Covid, especially at local government level and in children's services. The investment no longer feels wise. Of course, there is an argument that the money already invested would be wasted if we were to divert now. That is not necessarily the case if we can now follow a preferred solution of suspending the direction and holding the work and investment to date in abeyance pending further progress in WSCC.

Conclusions, Options and Recommendation

In summary, the recommendation to establish a trust for West Sussex children's services was a legitimate and necessary step at that time. This was fundamentally because the corporate conditions in the council could not be relied upon to support improvement. Since then remarkable progress has been made on a number of fronts to strongly suggest that those conditions now do exist and are increasingly sustainable. That progress has certainly exceeded what could have realistically been expected last year.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Coughlan', written in a cursive style.

John Coughlan

Chief Executive

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