

## **Report to Jersey Children's Services Strategic Leadership Board**

**September 2020**

The last seven months have been ones of unprecedented change and challenge for everyone in Jersey, in the UK and across the world, leading to new forms of working and virtual communication. This has impacted upon children's services as elsewhere. I have been unable to visit Jersey since the end of February 2020, so I am writing this report at some distance. I have stayed in regular contact with Mark Owers, Director of Safeguarding and Care, and his senior leadership team and I have discussed with him shape and pace of service development, as well as the service's response to Covid lockdown.

### **Covid 19**

The lockdown from Covid 19 led to rapid new responses to identify the island's most vulnerable children to ensure they remained visible while schools were closed or operating in limited ways. Children's social care RAG rated all open cases, which allowed managers to provide greater oversight to those children who were at greatest risk of harm or of family breakdown. This also led to a number of low-level child in need cases being closed in discussion with the family.

One achievement at the start of lockdown was the rapid development of the new children and families hub, integrating the front door to early help with MASH/ front door to children's social care and quickly establishing daily screening processes together to ensure that all contacts receive a response at the right level. This has been successful ensuring a proportionate response to all requests for support received. Initially there was a drop in contacts and referrals, but gradually demand has come back, but, with the hub's stronger focus on advice and information and offer of early help support, referrals to social care are still slightly lower than at the beginning of the year.

Staff retention was good during lockdown with staff adapting quickly to new ways of working and some families and young people finding it easier to engage meaningfully by video call. The RAG rating exercise and focus brought all managers together with a stronger sense of common purpose and mutual support.

As lockdown has eased and virus prevalence reduced, some staff have chosen to return to UK and issues of recruitment and retention have returned. The leadership team are working hard to increase the agency headcount but this is proving difficult in a post-COVID world.

For young people the easing of lockdown and the good summer weather has led to some incidents of gatherings outside, anti-social behaviour and children going 'Missing'.

## Developments

At the beginning of the year the Director of Safeguarding Care, Mark Owers, worked with his staff group and others to develop **Our Plan** which sets out a programme of significant cultural change over the next three years.

Over the last six months the building blocks for a strong and consistent and children's social care service have been put in place whilst also managing the immediate operational challenges. These key building blocks are:

- Vision and Purpose statement
- Our Plan
- Practice Standards and Quality Assurance Framework
- Continuum of Need (partnership threshold document)

These building blocks are being shared with partners through the Jersey Children Safeguarding Board and in operational groups.

A comprehensive programme of restorative practice training has begun for all staff to support the new approaches above.

'Our Plan' includes key projects and initiatives already agreed and new initiatives based on learning and service needs identified this year, including the financial challenge facing the Government of Jersey:

- A strengthened **care leavers service** with a team of personal advisors now in post
- An **intensive fostering scheme** for children with complex challenge who require a high level of care. ■■■ foster families are now undertaking further assessment and training.
- A **review of residential care**, carried out independently, to inform how Jersey can use its residential resources more effectively to improve outcomes for its most disadvantaged young people in care – this includes consideration of different models of rota and shift patterns
- A stronger focus on **recruitment and retention**
- A structure for the **social work service** that has fewer overall qualified social work posts that are better rewarded and supported, including a new assessment and support team to respond more consistently to the needs of children and families referred
- A strong focus on a culture of **learning and accountability**

To support this programme of service improvement a new **Insight and Enablement service** has been established which pulls together performance, QA, learning and development, children's rights and independent review. The intention is that the voice of the child is at the centre of and drives learning and practice improvement.

In addition, partnership operational boards for the children and families hub, social work, children in care and care leavers are consolidating and strengthening multi-agency approaches to the needs of children, young people and families.

## **Challenges**

'Our Plan' and the cultural and structural changes within is an ambitious programme of change to put the needs and aspirations of children at the centre. To achieve this successfully requires a joined-up partnership approach across the Children, Young People, Education and Skills (CYPES) department and with wider partners who work with children. The primary improvement drive has thus far been focused on children's social care. The development of early help within the hub and the easier access to early help support has been a significant development, and there is now a stronger virtual school for children in care with Personal Education Plans, and the ePEP, now more embedded.

However, there remains some significant gaps in support for children and young people such as the need for targeted youth support which might include elements of a youth offending service, including restorative justice. This service gap is highlighted by 'Operation Optical' which is seeking to respond to anti-social behaviour and some contextual safeguarding risks displayed by a small number of young people, including some in residential care. These are needs that can only be met by the shared resources and expertise of different parts of CYPES (e.g. schools, youth service, early help, children's social care and CAMHS) working closely together with other partners such as health, drugs and alcohol and Police.

Another gap is the availability of quite intensive therapeutic support for some young people on the edge of or in care and secure. The review of residential provision and the service developments in CAMHS will hopefully lead to enhanced emotional health and wellbeing and mental health provision and support to children in care and to foster carers and residential staff.

There have been a small number of high profile and very complex situations that the social work service has had to respond to this year. Where failings have been identified, for example through a serious case review or concern raised by the Court, learning circles have been set up to consider what could have been done differently and whether any policy or process change is required. The threshold for social work intervention in Jersey is relatively low (see previous reports). This leads to social workers and managers sometimes not giving sufficient time and engagement, analysis and reflection to very complex cases. The Covid period has been a time to evaluate and prioritise work towards the more difficult and complex.

The early help developments have been positive but there is still work to do to develop a targeted family support service that can work tenaciously with families to help them improve their parenting, similar to the intensive 'troubled families' approach in England, and thus free up social work time and expertise to focus energy on the children and young people whose needs are most complex. Critically, Jersey will need to develop a context specific response rather than simply replicate initiatives developed in other jurisdictions.

To undertake this ambitious programme of change, children's social care requires sufficient dedicated HR support that can get to know staff and the service well and provide both advice and technical support to the substantial change agenda. This includes: a new social work structure with different job titles and potential grading changes; new shift and rota patterns for residential staff; more support around recruitment and retention; and a stronger focus on tackling poor performance without drift. Some of these changes require consultation with staff and Unions and there is a need for sufficient capacity to undertake this. Overall, the plan is to have fewer but more skilled and better rewarded social work posts supported by able and experienced staff from other backgrounds (e.g. Family Support Workers, PAs, Children's Rights Officers), thus reducing the number of difficult to recruit posts and increasing opportunity for skilled staff who live on island.

Finally, a small point, on the Government website it is difficult to access information about children's social care or early help. It would be useful if these service areas had their own up to date web pages which were directly accessed from the front web page. This would promote better public understanding and access to the range of services spanning early help and children social care for children, young people and for parents and carers.

Alastair Gibbons  
Children's Services Independent Advisor  
September 2020