

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

March 2021

The last year has been one 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. The range and quality of early help support has increased and with the hub's stronger focus on advice and information, referrals requiring social work intervention have reduced in number (e.g. Feb 20 – 72 referrals; Feb 21 – 50 referrals) as early help support has grown.

Staff retention was good during spring 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 eased last summer, some staff have chosen to return to UK and issues of recruitment and retention have returned. This winter lockdown period has made recruitment to vacant social work posts more difficult.

### Developments

At the beginning of the 20/21 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 eight months the building blocks for a strong and consistent and more restorative 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 have been shared with partners through the Jersey Children Safeguarding Board and in operational groups.

A comprehensive programme of restorative practice training has taken place 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.

### **Performance and quality of practice**

The more restorative model of practice, working with families, has led to a gradual reduction in the numbers of children open to the service, the number subject to child protection and the number of children in care. In the last year children open have reduced from about 580 to 466, CP plans from 59 to 47, and children in care from 81 to 70. The children in care numbers will further reduce as there are over 20 young people in care aged 16 and 17. More detailed data about the service can be found in the attached *Children's Social Care Monthly Report February 2021*. This report provides a wide range of performance information. My only quibble with it is that the England statistical neighbour comparator group is not the right one for Jersey.

The development of early help services and the assessment and support team means that some children (and their families) with lower levels of need are receiving solution-focused support more quickly and not remaining open. Correspondingly the needs of children who remain open are more complex in general, requiring more intensive social work intervention and support, including support coordinated with partner agencies. Social work caseloads in Jersey are manageable but still as high as 20 for some social workers, which limits the amount of direct change work that can be carried out well.

There is some well-presented Quality information in the attached February report on page 6, showing the results of case file audits. Jersey is embedding its new approach to quality and has just held a 'practice week' (to coincide with world social work week) where senior leaders and managers sit with social workers to discuss a sample of cases and review recording. Also in practice week the service carried out a 'stocktake self-assessment' where each head of service presented their service achievements, concerns and actions needed, to the leadership team, to ensure a shared focus on service priorities.

### **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 partnership challenges to ensure effective support for children and young people with high needs. There is a need to develop:

- an integrated education, therapy and care offer to wrap around the small number of young

- people in care with the highest levels of need, particularly those in the residential homes
- Continue building a multi-disciplinary targeted youth support service which includes elements
- of a trauma-informed youth offending service, including restorative justice.

These are needs that can only be met by the shared resources and expertise of different parts of CYPES (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.

There have been a small number of high profile and very complex situations that the social work service has had to respond in the last 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. This requires social workers and managers to have the capacity to give sufficient time and engagement, analysis and reflection to very complex cases. The Covid period has helped here by allowing space 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.

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. Overall, the plan is to have fewer but more skilled and better rewarded qualified social worker posts which are supported by more able and experienced staff from other backgrounds (e.g., Family Support Workers, PAs), 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 CYPES or 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 user engagement and access to the wide range of services spanning early help, youth, children social care, CAMHS and Education for children, young people and for parents and carers.

**Alastair Gibbons**

Children's Services Independent Advisor