

Children's Services Transformation Plan

Cabinet

Date: 13th December 2023

Author: Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care

Corporate Director: Children's Services

Wards: All

Parishes Affected: All

1. Purpose and Reasons

- 1.1 This report sets out the Children's Services transformation plan which outlines in full the Council's Children's Services improvement journey, allowing elected Members to be sighted on, and committed to, the plan.
- 1.2 The report is essential following the Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework which judged Swindon's Children's Services to be inadequate in July 2023.
- 1.3 This plan remains in "draft" until signed off by the Department for Education Improvement Board which has its inaugural meeting in early December 2023. It is customary practice that the draft plan for improvement is shared with the Department for Education advisor and wider Council ahead of the improvement board meeting.
- 1.4 Swindon Children's Services is subject to a statutory Improvement notice which sets out what it must do and who it is to work with to ensure improvement in the areas identified and published in the report dated September 11th 2023. The lead member for children's services (LMCS) is accountable to the local community for delivering improved outcomes for children and families.
- 1.5 This work is aligned to the Build a Better Swindon Council Mission as it relates to the development of improved services for children and young people who require Children's Services intervention and/or support. The actions outlined in the plan when completed will, with partner agencies ensure that children, young people and their families in Swindon benefit from high quality services leading to good outcomes for all.

2. Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 Review and endorse the plan thus far, so that the Department for Education is clear that this plan is supported by the Cabinet, and that there is a clear commitment to the improvement of Children's Services.

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3. Detail

- 3.1 Through the beginning of 2023 the new Corporate Director for Children's Services completed a series of diagnostic activities which highlighted that the quality of practice within Swindon's Children's Services was not where it needed to be and then took steps to appraise the Council of the issues, including the outcome of a "mock inspection."
- 3.2 A service transformation plan was developed in March 2023 based on the findings of the diagnostic reviews and on-going quality assurance processes. This plan was developed and informed through consultation events with staff and partner agencies and underpinned by a new Vision for Children's Services.
- 3.3 This plan was shared with Ofsted during the ILACS in July 2023 with inspectors noting in the grading report that "the very recent appointment of a new corporate director for children's services has been a catalyst for a more rigorous and realistic appraisal by the local authority of the quality and effectiveness of services to Swindon's children and families." The ILACS report observed that some actions had already been put in place to address the deficits in practice which had begun to have an impact, however "most actions taken to drive improvement are either very recent or still at a planning stage, and so their impact is necessarily very limited."
- 3.4 Following the inspection, we have continually built upon the existing transformation plan to ensure that it fully and explicitly captures the recommendations contained within the Ofsted report published in Sept 2023. Whilst this recognises the areas that were already underway for improvement, the plan has been shared wider with key Agencies to ensure a better joined up approach in delivery of these priority areas.
- 3.5 The draft plan has been submitted to Corporate Management Team for scrutiny on 28th November and will be reviewed by the Improvement Board on 5th December. Once finalised it will be properly branded so that it is clear this is a Council plan and then published on the Council website.
- 3.6 This transformation plan is underpinned by an investment plan which has identified some resources to assist. This will need to be reviewed regularly by the DfE advisor and the Improvement Board.

4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 There are no alternative options.
- 4.2 The power to inspect a council children's services department and impose a statutory notice is contained within Section 497A of the Education Act 1996 (as applied to Children's Social Care by section 50 of the Children Act 2004).

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- 4.3 Under this legislation Councils that are subject to Department for Education intervention are required to prepare and publish a written statement of the action that the Council intends to take in response to the inspection findings within 70 working days of the publication of the ILACS report. This statement of action usually takes the form of an improvement plan which Ofsted reviews to ensure that it reflects the findings in the inspection report.
- 4.4 A reporting framework will also need to be developed which will be used to evidence impact of change and improvements, overseen by the Improvement Board.
- 4.5 A series of monitoring visits and shorter inspections will be completed by Ofsted 3-4 times a year to review progress against the transformation plan. It is expected that our first monitoring visit will be around February 2024.
- 4.6 In addition to the support of a Department for Education advisor the Council will also receive the support of a Sector Led Improvement partner. The Local Authority is not known at the time of submission.

5. Implications, Diversity Impact Assessment and Risk Management

Financial and Procurement Implications

- 5.1 Dedicated resources will be needed to support the improvement process, which needs to be driven at pace.
- 5.2 The resources identified as required to improve the service and ensure this is sustainable for future years will be a combination of one-off resource to accelerate the transformation and proposed increases in ongoing capacity. The transformation costs will be met from useable capital receipts in line with the strategy approved in the Budget Management Update report to Cabinet in September. The requirements for ongoing capacity have been included in the draft budget for 2024/25, which will be subject to approval by Full Council in February.

Legal and Human Rights Implications

- 5.3 The Council must ensure it meets the requirements of the Statutory Improvement Notice issued under Section 497A of the Education Act 1996 (as applied to Children's Social Care by section 50 of the Children Act 2004). Delivering improved practice would support children's right to family life – article 8 Human Rights Act 1998

Climate Change Impact

- 5.4 The proposal is designed to bring about improvement in service delivery however, Officers believe that there is no expected effect on the Council's carbon footprint.

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All Other Implications (including Staff, Sustainability, Health, Rural, Crime and Disorder)

- 5.5 Most staff are committed to improving practice and open to reflecting on the inspection findings, however in line with national practice some staff have chosen to leave the local authority following the inspection outcome.
- 5.6 In line with expectations following an inadequate judgement we have seen an increase in referrals from partner agencies, however this is being managed within the service.
- 5.7 It will be important to ensure that all partner agencies and internal staff are kept informed of the improvement plan and progress, ensuring that they are clear about their understanding of what needs to be done, therefore a robust communications strategy will also need to be developed and supported by the Council.

Equalities Impact Assessment

- 5.8 An EQIA has been undertaken which generally indicates positive benefits to protected characteristic groups including Children in Care and Care Leavers. Information (online / offline) will need to be published in accessible formats and new onsite works carefully managed to support and promote accessibility for all within the Swindon Community so that they are clear about the actions to be taken by the Council
- 5.9 No adverse or other significant issues were found. A copy of the EIA can be obtained from the report author.

Risk Management

- 5.10 There is a risk that should the Council receive a second inadequate inspection judgement within 5 years this would result in a commissioner being imposed by Department for Education as part of a Statutory Direction, which could also result in Department for Education directing partial or complete outsourcing of children's services.
- 5.11 It is imperative that the Council are able to progress the transformation at pace and with a focus on achieving a positive impact for children and young people.

6. Consultees

- 6.1 The Director of Finance and Audit (S151 officer) and Chief Legal Officer (Monitoring Officer) are consulted in respect of all reports.

7. Background Papers

- 7.1 None.

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8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix 1 - Draft Transformation Plan.

9. Key Decision/Decision in Cabinet Work Programme

9.1 This is a Key Decision and is included in the Cabinet Work Programme and Forward Plan for December 2023.