

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of this Committee held on
6 December 2021

- (Present)** Councillor T Long (Chair)
Councillors McDonnell, Mussell, Osundeko, Sims and Sweeney
- (Not Present)** Councillors Barton-Ainsworth, A Johnson, Greaves and Preston
Mr Williams (Roman Catholic Church Representative)
Mr D Thorpe (Church of England Representative)
Miss A Kirman (Parent Governor – Primary)
Mrs P Lawson (Parent Governor – Secondary)

19 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Barton-Ainsworth, Greaves, A Johnson, Preston, Mr Williams, Mr Thorpe and Miss Kirman.

20 MINUTES

- * Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 20 September 2021, be approved and signed.

21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No Declarations of interest from Members were made.

22 DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIP

No Declarations of party whip were made.

23 CHILDREN IMPROVEMENT BOARD UPDATE

The Director of Children's Services presented the Children Improvement Board Update, which provided the progress made since September 2021 as part of the Children's Services improvement journey.

Following the inadequate judgement by Ofsted, the Council were required to report on a regular basis to an improvement board approved by the Department for Education (DfE).

Initially this identified six key areas for improvement.

In May 2021, the Council received a Focus Visit from Ofsted which formed the basis of a Restart Inspection. This identified three key areas for improvement.

As a consequence, the improvement had been updated by the Children's Improvement Board (CIB) that reflected the latest inspection outcome. This was updated fortnightly by Heads of Services (HOS) from across the department and presented monthly to Departmental Leadership Team (DLT).

HOS would detail the action they have already undertaken and what action they intend to take in response to OFSTED findings following the May 2021 Re-Start Visit. This plan

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would be tracked in the HOS Improvement meeting. There were three key areas for improvement which were;

- the quality of decision-making to progress plans for children within the pre-proceeding's element of the Public Law Outline, and the management oversight of this;
- the quality and effectiveness of the case audit activity to inform leaders of the impact of social work interventions on children's progress and lived experience; and
- the balance of social workers' workloads and the prioritisation of tasks by social workers and managers to avoid any unnecessary drift and delay for children in need of support, help and protection.

The action plan would be reviewed fortnightly with all HOS, updated monthly and reported to Children's Services DLT monthly.

One of the latest initiatives introduced in November 2021 was that for an action to be signed off, evidence must be presented. Hyperlinks would be added to hold this information centrally. The action would also be reviewed on a quarterly basis to provide reassurance on impact and consistency.

It was confirmed that improvements were not being achieved at as fast a pace as they would like, which was due to a number of issues.

In light of the news headlines over the previous days about the abuse and murder of a child and the sentencing of the perpetrators, Members were assured that child safety was a priority and the systems in place in St Helens were robust.

Staff retention was an issue which had impacted upon services, however this was an issue which was nationwide and not just local. There were also a number of staff on or about to take maternity leave which had meant an extra pressure. Steps had been taken to appoint and retain staff although it remained challenging. Part of the challenge to appoint and retain staff was also the type of cases which were appearing more throughout services, which often involved drugs, alcohol and violence.

A range of systems and processes had been put in place during lockdown to ensure support was given to the most vulnerable children and young people. Those systems and processes had external judgements of being appropriate. Examples of this were the support given to the vulnerable children in terms of schooling during the pandemic

A query was raised in relation to the increase in the timeframe for pre-proceedings, which had moved from 12 weeks to 16 weeks.

It was confirmed that staff vacancies played a part in that, however 16 weeks was still a good target. An organisation had been appointed to provide extra staffing, which would relieve the pressure on the Assessments service.

It was queried why several actions on the Action Plan were documented as needing further work and what challenges were causing this.

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It was confirmed that the delay in moving forward or needing further work was largely due to lack of resources and staffing. Some of the issues had been resolved and in terms of staff on maternity leave, and some staff were due to return in the New Year which would also reduce pressure.

A dedicated project manager had been appointed on Signs of Safety and there were new forms in place for staff to use, however the changes would take time to be embedded into the system and show results.

A query was raised about safeguarding leads in schools not having access to information about individual cases and about the general lack of communication between schools and Children's Services.

It was acknowledged that the IT systems didn't support the sharing of information in the way they should. However, work was taking place around this matter, and it was hoped that access to cases would be able to be given to schools in some way so that they would be aware of any issues concerning children in their school.

A comment was made with regard to the technical information contained in a section of the report and the use of acronyms, which can be confusing and lack meaning to people reading the reports who weren't familiar with the language.

It was agreed that acronyms were used too much and that it needed to be addressed so that it could be understood by those outside of social care.

A query was raised in relation to a red area on the report which flagged up the effectiveness of the service and what would need to happen to go from red to green.

It was confirmed that a monitoring visit by Ofsted had taken place, however the result of that had not yet been received. It was hoped that this would be received in the New Year at which point an update could be brought back to this Committee.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the report be noted;**
- (2) a table be provided in reports to indicate the meanings of the acronyms used within the reports; and**
- (3) an update on the work of communication between schools and Children's Services be brought to a future meeting of this Committee.**

24 QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Quarter 2 Performance Report 2021/22 was presented by the Director of Children's Services, which provided an analysis of progress and performance over the period. The report reflected the new Performance Framework and targets aligned to the priorities and outcomes of the Borough Strategy as agreed by Cabinet on 21 April 2021. This framework would provide the basis for quarterly performance reporting to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny over the course of 2021/22.

Annual targets had been set where possible within the context of national, North West, and local authority comparator group data. Equally targets aspired to be challenging but

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achievable within the context of the available resources. The targets also took account of performance during 2020/21 which was an unprecedented year due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic on performance within St Helens, be it direct or indirect, was highlighted within the 2020/21 Performance Outturn Report. The impact of the pandemic in Quarter 2 2020/21 needed to be considered when reviewing the 12-month performance trend in Quarter 2 2021/22. Equally in many areas the impact of the pandemic on performance was yet to be fully realised and understood.

However, given the effect of the pandemic on St Helens to date there was the strong likelihood that existing inequalities may be widened, presenting potential risks for future performance in relation to the outcomes the Council is seeking to deliver.

A query was raised with regard to the percentage of early help audits rated good or outstanding, audit rates for voice of the child and the tier 2 indicator which was also off target.

It was confirmed that in terms of early help audits it was recognised what was needed and this included a re-organisation of the service which was happening. In terms of voice of the child, the most recent Ofsted visit was that the children were listened to in St Helens. It was acknowledged that there were some disappointing figures but it was highlighted that the numbers were only very small percentage shifts.

A question was raised regarding the children looked after rate and the comparisons with other boroughs in the fourth quartile.

It was highlighted that that the looked after children numbers included a historic volume of cases. However, there were now placement panels who met twice weekly to discuss cases at the highest level and look to introduce challenge into the process of where the case is and what was being done.

It was asked if a local authority similar to St Helens be identified to share good practice with which could then be used in St Helens.

It was confirmed that a meeting had taken place with the DfE to discuss finding a suitable authority to work with to look at best practice, with a view to adopting relevant practices in St Helens to gain improvements.

A comment was made with regard to training and the importance of ensuring proper training for staff to ensure they were able to produce suitable relevant material for auditing.

It was confirmed that this was acknowledged that qualitative information was essential and that was where improvements were being concentrated and training was essential to this.

A query was raised in regard to the indicators relating to children leaving care who were in education, training or employment.

It was confirmed that the indicators during the first part of the year would always be lower due to more children being in the system, however as children move through the system then the figures would change. There would be a period/s when there would appear more

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who weren't in any education, training or employment as they would have only just left school and not yet started college or were waiting to start a course or job.

A query was made in relation to children in placements out of borough, and if the number was decreasing.

It was confirmed that there was one child from St Helens who was based in secure unit in Scotland and that was due to the nature of the case. There were other children who secure placements were being sought, but it was difficult to find suitable places and they often brought significant costs. Members were assured that St Helens did not use any unsafe or unlicensed placements and the priority was to ensure the best interests of the child were met.

It was queried if there were any Social Work Champions to ensure that caseloads were balanced.

It was acknowledged that the idea was very appropriate and was something which was being looked at as part of the reorganization of the service.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) **the performance position at Q2 2021/22 for Priority 1 – Ensure Children and young people have a positive start in life be noted;**
- (2) **the actions planned by the Children and Young People & Integrated Health and Social Care directorates and services to address specific areas for performance be noted; and**
- (3) **the ongoing programme of development of the Council's new performance framework over the course of 2021/22 be noted.**

25 CABINET RESPONSE TO THE IMPROVING WORK OPPORTUNITIES FOR CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE TASK GROUP

A report was submitted which provided the Cabinet response to the Improving Work Opportunities for Care Experienced Young People Task Group Report.

The report outlined actions which it was confirmed were to date either completed or in progress.

* **Resolved that the Cabinet response to the recommendations be noted.**

26 SCHOOLS UPDATE

A presentation was provided by the Assistant Director – Education and Learning which updated Members on the Catch Up Funding for schools and how that was being utilised. The presentation covered the following areas:

- Objectives;
- Summary of Autumn Term;
- Catch Up Funding Overview;
- Calculations;
- Expectations;

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- Case Studies - School A, Specific Strategies and Impact;
- School B – Specific Strategies and Impact;
- School C – Intended Outcomes, Strategy, Evidence Base, Intended Impact;
- Targeted Support;
- External Targeted Support/Additional; and
- Feedback.

It was queried if universities in the local area were being engaged with to give young people a wider reach as to what they can aspire to do.

It was confirmed that there was engagement ongoing with universities to expand the information available to children and parents in terms of what they can go on to do from school to enable them to steer their studies towards achieving that.

Members queried how far children were attending the extra activities being offered, such as the Saturday afternoon classes offered by one of the schools previously mentioned.

It was confirmed that children were keen to attend such sessions, however it had only been introduced in November 2021 so it was yet to be seen what the impact would be.

The general feel across the Borough, however, was that the children were keen to learn and be in school.

A query was raised with regard to vaccination of staff and what impact it could have if teachers have not had their vaccinations.

It was confirmed that there was no legal requirement for teachers to disclose if they have been vaccinated or not, however headteacher's were aware of some staff who had not been double vaccinated. Where staff have been identified, things are in place to keep those staff as safe as possible.

It was questioned whether the Aspirational Board which was due to be set up had met yet and whether Lipa had been approached as per suggestions in a previous meeting, to help introduce children to the possibility of careers in sports?

It was confirmed that there had not been another meeting of the Board but the uptake was very high and it was thought that it would be too big to be a Board going forward, so it was anticipated that there would be a series of workstreams instead and contact had been made with various places, such as Glass Futures and other organisations including Lipa.

It was queried whether more Universities had been engaged with to raise the aspirations of children and show the wide range of options available to them.

It was confirmed that links with Edge Hill, John Moore's and Liverpool Universities were strong. However, the aim was to engage other universities which required higher grades as there were young people in the Borough who would aspire to attend university and there needs to be links with universities further afield.

* **Resolved that the presentation be noted.**

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27 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Work Programme was attached to the agenda for consideration by Members. It was suggested that as there was an extra meeting of the Committee scheduled in January 2022 to look at the Foster Carers report then the Work Programme could be considered during that meeting.

It was also suggested that an update on the Ofsted Monitoring Visit be brought to the January 2022 meeting.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the Work Programme be discussed at the next meeting of the Committee scheduled for January 2022; and**
- (2) an update on the Ofsted Monitoring visit be brought to the next meeting of the Committee scheduled for January 2022.**

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