

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of this Committee held on
25 July 2022

(Present) Councillor T Long (Chair)
Councillors Greaves, Maguire, Murphy, Osundeko, Sheldon, Sims and Sweeney

(Not Present) Councillors Begum and McCormack
Mr Williams (Roman Catholic Church Representative)
Mr D Thorpe (Church of England Representative)
Miss A Kirman, (Parent Governor – Primary)

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor McCormack and Amy Kirman.

2 **MINUTES**

* Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 21 March 2022, be approved and signed.

3 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No Declarations of interest from Members were made.

4 **DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIP**

No Declarations of party whip were made.

5 **DIRECTORS REPORT**

The Director of Children's Services gave a report which provided a detailed summary of the improvement journey for Children Services and showed the relevant progress being made relating to four priority areas of the Children's Improvement Plan, in key departmental areas: Children's Social Care, Integrated Children's Safeguarding and Quality Assurance. It also summarised key developments in Early Help and Education.

In 2019 St Helen's Children's Service was judged 'Inadequate overall by Ofsted. The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers was deemed 'Inadequate', and the experiences and progress of children who needed help and protection and the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families were both judged as 'Requires Improvement'.

There had subsequently been four monitoring visits, all of those had stated that although there had been some improvements there was a lack of rigour and pace to the progress being made.

A Children's Improvement Board was set up by the previous Director of Children's Services and continued to act as the overarching framework for improvement, monitoring areas where there was evidence of progress, and areas where progress was ongoing and needed added impetus.

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A Children's Improvement Plan had been developed, with four priority areas, which were:

- Priority 1 – Creating the environment to enable good practice;
- Priority 2 – Improve the quality of key aspects of practice;
- Priority 3 – Leaders and Managers have an accurate understanding of practice to drive improvement; and
- Priority 4 – Develop key areas of the service.

The report outlined the areas of key developments within each priority area, and what still needed to be achieved.

In conclusion, it was confirmed that the last 10 weeks had been extremely busy, and the service had worked incredibly hard to make up for any time lag and ensure that improvement could be demonstrated prior to the Ofsted monitoring visit. Although the improvements would take some time to show impact, it was reported as heading in the right direction. The service was more stable, and caseloads were reducing.

However, it was confirmed that there was still a long way to go for the service. There was still a cohort of children who for many reasons, especially through the time of significant changes of workers, had not had sufficient work undertaken with either them or their families.

Whilst exiting children from care, there had also been some large families brought into care through real neglect. It was therefore advised that for a while the figures moved upwards whilst that cohort was managed and then reduce as they worked through the system. Work was currently underway with support to prevent this, but it was expected that it would not be possible to prevent all the cases escalating.

The Committee was advised that work on the improvement journey would continue in Summer and into Autumn and that the children's improvement plan was going to be re-written in the next two months so it showed impact and was measurable, this would provide a stronger platform with which to demonstrate impact and show progress. It would also provide the service with the roadmap out of Inadequate which was what must be achieved in the next Ofsted inspection.

It was also reported that a fourth Ofsted visit was in progress which was looking at Early permanence Procedures.

It was advised there was now a stable workforce, which was key to moving things forward and making the necessary improvements and that work was taking place at pace in all areas.

A query was raised with regard to how risk to vulnerable children was being managed given that some social workers have very large caseloads.

It was confirmed that caseloads had been reduced however, there were three newly qualified Social Workers who had more than 17 cases, but this was due to the fact that they were experienced and just had not completed the full training. One did have 30 cases however this was because there were large family units.

Assurance was given that the risks to vulnerable was managed and the reduction in case loads which was a key part of managing risks. Unfortunately, neglect was high in St

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Helens which was a real concern and in order to manage the risks with that a Co-ordinator had been employed to work with families to reduce neglect This was as some families just needed extra support which meant that neglect could then be identified and managed better before it escalated.

There was good partnership working taking place to help reduce risk and it was being managed well in St Helens.

A query was raised with regard to the Innovate team and what their role was and the impact they had on the service.

It was confirmed that the Innovate team were project teams of Social Workers who go into Local Authorities to relieve the pressures on the service and provide experienced staff, however the downside was that they were extremely expensive and pay their social workers higher rates than Local Authorities can afford to pay, which was a huge problem. This had resulted in some of the agency workers leaving to join the Innovate Teams, which had a huge impact on the service. The Innovate teams were due to leave in November and that would have a major impact on staffing and caseloads once more.

It was reported that Children's care costs had escalated dramatically and to tackle that issue, funding received from Government would be directed into establishing in-house residential care homes which would alleviate the cost issues and the quality of care.

It was asked when the Innovate team had been brought in and if the costs and issues had been known at that time.

It was confirmed that Innovate were brought in November 2021 and assurance given that costs would have been known at the time. It was advised a second team had needed to be brought in in May 2022. One team was due to leave in November 2022 and work was taking place to replace them however it would mean that it was necessary to find at least 10 Social Workers which was a big task given that pay was greater in the private sector.

A question was asked around the Signs of Safety scheme and if this was to be continued. It was confirmed that this was something which would be continued. Partner agencies liked the scheme however, it was important to build relationships with families to improve circumstances long term. It was advised it wouldn't be appropriate to change the scheme at the present time, however if the service is judged at 'Needs Improvement' status, then other options would be looked at.

A query was raised around SEND and how government changes would affect St Helens, in particular how funding would be directed to ensure the needs of SEND children were accommodated.

It was confirmed that a lot of work was taking place 'behind the scenes' on this however, it was in the early stages of being mapped out as to how things were going to work. It was proposed that an update report be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee once plans were confirmed.

A question was raised around the shortage of foster placements in St Helens, specifically the recommendations from the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee which had been put forward and if they would they be taken account and implemented.

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It was agreed that it was vital to increase the number of Foster Carers and a meeting had taken place looking at how to attract more people into fostering and how that could be attached to the wraparound care model.

A query was raised around Social Worker assessments and if work was being done to improve these. It was confirmed that getting assessments right was a top priority and work was taking place around training to ensure improvements were made.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) **the report be noted; and**
- (2) **an update on the plans for SEND once completed be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee; and**

6 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

A presentation was given The Consultant of Early Help which gave an update on Children's Social Care Workforce Development. The following areas were covered:

- Need for change;
- Review for current issues;
- Initial findings;
- Annual staff survey;
- Actions taken;
- Actions ongoing;
- Staff engagement; and
- Early improvement signs.

In terms of staffing, it was confirmed that agency staff were leaving to take up posts with other agencies/firms which had a significant impact on the service. It was acknowledged it was necessary to look at what staff felt were the issues, what made them leave for other posts and what would encourage them to stay, aside from salary. Key areas were being looked at and employment packages had been improved as well as internal working procedures to make things more efficient. It was advised that competition was tough in the whole of the sector which was having a major impact on recruitment.

In terms of improvements, which were beginning to show, it was seen that the workforce was beginning to stabilise with very limited movement for last two months. There had been a significant increase in 'reach' for advertised posts with 12,000 views, 987 hits on the microsite and 96 people accessing the Job site in a 2-week period. Applications had increased and there had been an increase in shortlisted positions and interviews taking place on five roles (multiple positions) within the service. Staff feedback had also been positive.

A query was raised regarding new Social Workers having large caseloads and what could be done to ensure that they did not leave the service due to pressure of work. It was confirmed that new Social Workers with higher caseloads was due to there being large family units involved. Work was ongoing to ensure that caseloads were kept at manageable levels as staff recruitment was a priority.

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A query was raised as to whether the idea of simplified Human Resources (HR) procedures for new applicants to Social Worker posts was working to speed up recruitment.

It was confirmed that it was a complex area and work was being undertaken with HR so that functionality was simpler and the process of applying for posts quicker. However the background system of having to go through the portal and complete a full application was still there and having to be managed. Work was ongoing to tackle the issue to make the process concise and expedited.

A query was raised by the Committee with regard to the International Social Worker Recruitment programme and for a brief outline of what this entailed.

It was confirmed that the programme was set up with the intention of employing Social Workers from other countries. Being creative and innovative and looking around the country at what other authorities were doing in terms of adopting this approach was thought essential to get an idea of best practice in this area as the approach was varied and it had been agreed to look at agencies who could assist with recruitment to reduce the complications of processes that can occur when employing people from other countries. Training and qualifications were very similar in other countries as they are in the United Kingdom so the knowledge and experience was transferable.

It was advised that costs incurred by using an agency to assist with recruitment were offset by savings made in getting qualified, experienced Social Workers recruited without the longer drawn-out procedures having to be undertaken by internal staff. The approach was being looked at carefully and views and input from Members was important to moving forward and coming up with a feasible route to using Social Workers from other countries.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the report be noted;**
- (2) the Chair of the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee write to the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council to ask for intervention to speed up the recommendations pertaining to the HR processes and systems for the recruitment of Social Workers; and**
- (3) work to be done undertaken with local Colleges and Sixth Forms to highlight the rewards of a career in Social Work to supplement the information detailed in university prospectuses.**

7 PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT OUTTURN 2022/23

The Performance Monitoring Report was submitted which detailed the progress against the borough priorities during the period 2021/22.

The report provided an analysis of progress and performance over the year against each of the Council's six priorities. The Report reflected performance during the financial year and the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on many of the Council's measures of performance. The Council acknowledged that effective performance management arrangements were critical to supporting decision making during these challenging times.

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It was emphasised that a revised performance framework and targets had been produced and agreed linked to the priorities and outcomes within the 'Our Borough Strategy 2021-30'. The new framework would form the basis for quarterly reporting to Cabinet during 2022-23 and work was ongoing to ensure its effective development.

Members were reminded that the 2021/22 performance outturn position should be viewed within the context of what had continued to be a challenging operational period for the Council. The continued effect of the pandemic, rising demand for services and the requirement to deliver significant budget savings had impacted the Council's ability to meet targets and demonstrate improvements in performance trends in the 12-month period from April 2021 to March 2022. Equally, in many areas, the impact of the pandemic on performance was yet to be fully realised and understood.

Given the effect of the pandemic on St Helens to date, there was the strong likelihood that existing inequalities may be widened. This presented risks for future performance, particularly in areas such as public health, education and schools and children's services where current performance was already challenging.

The Performance Outturn Report 2021-22 – Priority 1 focus for Children and Young People Services Scrutiny Committee provided an assessment of the Council's performance for the 2021-22 financial year.

It was highlighted that the impact of the pandemic continued to pose significant challenges for the Council and St Helens Borough. Robust and appropriate performance management arrangements continued to be critical to support effective decision making and enable the delivery of the Council's desired outcomes across the borough and its communities.

A query was raised around Early Help and concerns raised around financial reductions and how this would affect the ability to improve this service. It was confirmed that Early Help and prevention work was key to keeping children safe and it had been requested that cuts did not happen in this area.

Getting the 'Prevention Agenda' right was key to alleviating pressure on the Early Help service as reducing the number of children coming into care naturally would reduce costs. The Committee was informed work was ongoing to adjust the wraparound services so that the whole process of care was moving well and children were also exiting care, which further reduced pressures and costs.

A concern was raised with regard to performance indicators not being met and why the figures had increased instead of decreased.

It was confirmed that the timeline of the indicators was one reason for this as the impact of the pandemic was now beginning to be released which had affected care figures..

Members noted the issues with timelines on getting Education Health Care Plans (EHCPs) completed and questioned what was being done to address the delays in completing these.

It was acknowledged that this was a problem area. Part of the delay in this area was due to a lack of Educational Psychologists. Assurance was given that this was a priority and

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work was ongoing to improve timescales and there was a drive to get more Psychologists on board.

A query was raised with regard to hospital admissions due to self-harm, it was commented that it was positive that targets were being met but, worrying that it was still very high and queried how this was being addressed.

It was confirmed that self-harm was due to emotional distress and mental health and rates were high. It was acknowledged this was not good but, Members were assured that it was a priority and part of the Suicide Prevention Plan and in addition a specific self-harm task group was being set up to look at tackling this.

A query was raised as to why anorexia was not tracked along with other eating disorders in the borough. It was confirmed that anorexia was not a public health indicator but, the question would be taken forward to the relevant partners for consideration. It was explained from a public health perspective, children who were underweight were looked at but for wider various health reasons, rather than just for eating disorders.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the report be noted; and**
- (2) recommendations within the report be approved.**

8 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

A draft work programme was provided to Members for consideration of topics for the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee to consider during the Municipal Year.

The topics listed on the draft programme were circulated to Members for consideration.

It was proposed that a meeting be arranged for Tuesday 26 July 2022 at 4.00pm to agree the work programme going forward and what should be included on the agenda for the October 2022 meeting of the Committee.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the report be noted; and**
- (2) a meeting be scheduled for Tuesday, 26 July 2022 at 4pm to consider the topics on the Work Programme for the municipal year and the agenda items for the October 2022 meeting.**

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