

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of this Committee held on  
9 January 2023

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

**(Also Present)** Councillor Charlton, Cabinet Member Children and Young People

**(Not Present)** Councillors CD Banks and McCormack

Mr C Williams (Roman Catholic Church Representative)  
Mr D Thorpe (Church of England Representative)  
Miss A Kirman, (Parent Governor – Primary)

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### 17 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillors CD Banks and McCormack.

### 18 **MINUTES**

\* Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 10 October 2022, be approved and signed.

### 19 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No Declarations of interest from Members were made.

### 20 **DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIP**

No Declarations of party whip were made.

### 21 **IMPROVEMENT PROGRESS IN CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SINCE JULY 2022**

A report was submitted to provide an overview of the improvement journey in St Helens Children's Social Care in the last six months.

Members were informed that the last Ofsted monitoring visit in July 2022 and a subsequent meeting with the Department for Education (DFE) in August 2022 had been positive, in that they both evidenced the pace of improvement in St Helens. Since the summer, Leaders, Managers and staff had worked extremely hard to build on that momentum, and there was evidence of improved quality of practice and that the impact of the work with children and families was improving outcomes.

The demand for services was increasing, with a higher-than-average number of Children in Need (420 per 10,000 children); Child and Family Assessments completed (1028 per 10,000); children subject to Child Protection Plans (68 per 10,000) and Children We Look After (130 per 10,000). This was a challenging time for vulnerable families as levels of child poverty were rising due to the cost-of-living crisis. The impact was being seen by the increased numbers of contacts and referrals to services.

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The impact of the Autumn Statement 2022 on local authority budgets and on families on low incomes was detailed and appended to the report at Appendix 1. Also appended to the report was the Children's Services Improvement Plan: '*Children at the heart of everything we do*'.

The report provided the following detailed information which was outlined:

- The impact of leaders;
- Partnership working;
- Workforce and recruitment;
- Quality Assurance;
- Early Help;
- Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and Front door;
- Assessment teams;
- Achieving permanence;
- Complex safeguarding and exploitation
- Vulnerable adolescents;
- Children in care and care leavers; and
- The improvement team

In conclusion, it was reported that:

- despite rising demand and the very complex children and families that social workers were working with, there was evidence that good practice was being embedded in every team;
- all staff were supported by managers who provided oversight and guidance through supervision and management oversight, and leaders who were providing the resources and culture for good practice to thrive; and
- the improvement journey in St Helens was moving at pace. Leaders were aware, however, that the pressure must not be tapered off and there must remain an intense focus on improvement and improving the lives of vulnerable children and young people in St Helens.

Comments and queries were raised by Members as follows:

- In the Children's Improvement Plan, it was requested if the 'Measures' column could include more detail on the specific measures and targets. A response was provided, and it was indicated that the Plan was reviewed and updated on a regular basis by the Children's Improvement Board;
- Information was provided upon how the social work staffing position would be managed until April 2023, when a number of newly recruited staff would be in post;
- Finer detail was provided on the management of caseload volumes and staff recruitment, in particular how staff with high caseloads were supported and that risk was mitigated using number of strategies;
- Partnership working arrangements were clarified, together with the ongoing work to improve that area such as safeguarding training needs and developments in key areas;

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- The numbers of Looked After Children in the borough were discussed, and it was reported that St Helens was one of the highest performance rates of getting children out of care. However, delays in the court system meant that children coming into care resulted in performance being in the middle quartile. Ongoing work was in place to address the issue via dialogue with the courts;
- Looked After Children numbers were higher than national average, and the impact of Early Help and family hubs was certainly helping in reducing the numbers;
- It was recommended to involve young people who had experiences of Neglect and experienced Neglect in the prevention campaigns that had been introduced with local educational establishments;
- The passion and commitment of the social work staff to maintaining the momentum for improvement was acknowledged by the Committee;
- A query was raised about the capacity to increase assessed and supported year (AYSE) provision and it was confirmed that there was an apprenticeship programme in place to ensure a sufficient cohort of AYSE's. It was also confirmed that there were opportunities for social worker progression to the role of practice educators and that this was actively promoted; and
- Finer detail was provided on audit activity that had been provided in the Improvement Plan, and information was provided on the improvement work that was being undertaken to address the practices graded as 'Inadequate'. Members commented that they looked forward to seeing an impact of this improvement work on the statistics at the next meeting.

\* **Resolved that:**

- (1) **the report be noted; and**
- (2) **all staff in Children's Services, along with the Director and Leadership Team and the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, be thanked for all their hard work involved in the recent Ofsted inspections and the improvement progress.**

### **22 PERFORMANCE REPORT – QUARTER 2 2022-23**

The Quarter 2 Performance Report 2022-23 was presented and provided an analysis of progress and performance over the period April to June 2022 against each of the Council's six priorities.

The report reflected the new Performance Framework and targets aligned to the priorities and outcomes of the Borough Strategy as agreed by Cabinet on 20 April 2022. This framework provided the basis for quarterly performance reporting to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny over the course of 2022-23.

The Council acknowledged that effective performance management arrangements were critical to supporting decision making during these challenging times and work continued to ensure the development of the Performance Framework and performance management processes across the Council.

It was reported that there were 85 performance indicators, where targets had been set, reported in the Quarter 2 Performance Report 2022-23. Of these:

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- 75% of indicator targets had been either exceeded, met fully, or met within 95% of target. This compared to 73% of indicators in the previous quarter and 60% at Quarter 2 2021/22;
- 25% of indicator targets were not met. This compared to 27% of indicators in the previous quarter and 40% of indicators in Quarter 2 2021/22;
- Over the course of the last 12 months 56% of indicators showed improvement, 5% of indicators maintained the same performance and 39% of indicators showed a downward trajectory. The position was an improvement on the position in the previous quarter where only 46% of indicators showed improvement. The position was also an improvement on the position reported in Q2 2021/22, where 49% of indicators showed improvement; and
- 39% of all indicators where comparison was possible were in the top quartile, compared to 35% at Q2 2021/22, whilst 33% were in the bottom quartile, compared to 30% at Q2 2021/22.

In summary, at Quarter 2 there were a number of areas where performance against outcomes was either some distance from the Quarter 2 target or an outlier in terms of St Helens performance relative to the England average or St Helens nearest neighbours.

In conclusion, it was reported that the Quarter 2 Performance Report 2022-23 at Annex A provided an assessment of the Council's performance over the second three months of the 2022-23 financial year.

The impact of the pandemic and sustained financial pressure on local government 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.

Members' attention was drawn to performance data that had been included within the Children's Improvement Plan which contained more detailed, quantitative data when compared to the Performance Report Quarter 2 2022/23 which was time lagged.

Comments and queries were raised by Members as follows:

- An updated position was provided on assessment timeliness which was now at 81% and much closer to statistical nearest neighbouring authorities;
- An update was also provided upon request, in respect of Education Psychologist recruitment and an update on Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) casework provision and SEND assessment review;
- In relation to the Healthy Child Programme indicators, attention was drawn to the improvement work that was being put on place to address areas of underperformance. It was advised that collaboration with partners via family hub provision and the work of the People's Board would play a key role in the improvement journey;
- Information was provided on the ongoing work towards identification and potential locations of family hubs;
- Following discussion of the under 18 admissions to hospital for alcohol specific reasons per 100,000 population, it was confirmed that a universal approach was in place via partnership working training programmes. Campaigns were also in place to promote key messages around prevention, and information was provided about

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the additional resources put in place within alcohol and substance misuse services.

However, it was recommended that a wider approach be adopted to include campaigns in educational establishments to raise awareness of health implications. It was agreed that this recommendation would be explored.

- In terms of dental checks measures, improvement work that was being undertaken for looked after children and young people was indicated, in addition to work that could be undertaken to improve outcomes, however it was acknowledged that there were resource challenges and access to dentists; and
- the Director of Children's Services explained that, following an option to do so, they had changed or added some performance indicators with revised targets.

\* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the performance position at Quarter 2 2022-23 be noted;**
- (2) the revised targets for the performance indicators at Annex B be noted; and**
- (3) the actions planned by the Children and Young People's Services Directorate and services to address specific areas for performance improvement in relation to Priority 1 be noted.**

### **23 RECRUITMENT & RETENTION OF FOSTER CARERS TASK GROUP (PROGRESS REPORT)**

A report was provided to update the Children and Young People Services Scrutiny Committee on the actions agreed in response to the recommendations of the Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers Task Group, which was agreed by Scrutiny Committee on 31 January 2022 and the current recruitment and retention activity underpinned by the recommendations.

An update Action Plan, that set out progress made against the recommendations from the Recruitment and Retention Foster Carers Task Group, was attached to the report at Appendix 1.

At the beginning of the 2021/22 municipal year, members of the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee were concerned about whether there was a sufficient supply of foster carers within the borough to meet the needs of children and young people who required foster care. In response, Members committed to holding a Task Group to explore the recruitment and retention of foster carers within the borough.

The Task Group report and recommendations was approved by Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee at a meeting held on 31 January 2022. As per the Council's Constitution the report was presented to the CYPS Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held in July 2022.

Subsequently there had been considered focus upon the Task Group report and the recommendations agreed. To progress a number of key recommendations a further report was submitted to the Senior Leadership Team in September 2022 seeking approval to a number of identified incentives to support recruitment activity and to approve the

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realignment and development of the service to meet the priority of increasing and retaining foster carers, which was approved.

The recommendations of the Task Group and the approvals granted in September 2022 had been considered and a project team developed to ensure oversight and scrutiny of both workstreams. This activity was reported to the Director of Children's Services on a weekly basis.

The project team had developed a Project Plan with key workstreams which were outlined in the report.

In conclusion, it was reported that the current cost to the local authority of those children placed in external residential care settings was approximately £13.5 million per year, and the average annual placement cost £254k. Based on current costs, reducing the number of children/young people in residential care and placing them with specialist foster carers would reduce costs.

Feedback in relation to the current recruitment and retention activity was provided as follows:

- Members were pleased to see that fostering enquiries had risen in December 2022 and thanks were given to the staff in the service for that achievement;
- Whilst it was acknowledged that the assessment process was intrusive, reassurance was provided that unsuccessful applications were provided with a process for feedback in a sensitive manner and support to meet standards, and to communicate that their enquiry was valued;
- Members were pleased that if a placement ended unexpectedly or the foster carer was not matched with a child/young person following approval, it would be expected that the foster carers were used as part of the Edge of Care Offer to provide additional support and looked forward to seeing the future progress of that approach;
- Congratulations were offered upon the highly effective marketing recruitment campaign. Discussion took place on the need to develop an approach to target different communities in the borough to recruit foster carers, with ideas and suggestions being welcomed from Members;
- Information was provided on how recruitment material was also shared with schools and safeguarding partners as part of the recruitment drive, and suggestions were made about the effectiveness of extending promotions via pop up events in establishments which had proved to be popular in other boroughs; and
- It was confirmed that a strategy document was in the process of being produced to set out how recognition could be given to foster carers.

\* **Resolved that the updated Action Plan attached at Appendix 1 of the report, that set out the progress made against the recommendations from the Recruitment and Retention Foster Carers Task Group, be noted.**

### 24 IMPROVING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE SPOTLIGHT REVIEW

A report was submitted which provided a summary of the evidence that was submitted to the Children and Young People's Services spotlight review, Improving school attendance

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in St Helens. The report concluded with five recommendations to ensure that a culture of 'Every Attendance Matters' was introduced in the Borough.

The report presented this Committee with the findings from the spotlight review 'Improving School Attendance'

Based on its findings, the Committee's main objective was to contribute to strategies to improve school attendance rates in St Helens, thereby improving pupil achievement, well-being, life chances and reducing the potential of children and young people's vulnerability to harm.

Members were informed that, at the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee Workshop on 6 July 2022, it was agreed to hold a spotlight review on 3 November 2022 to contribute to wider work to improve school attendance in St Helens.

This focus was agreed because overall absences in St Helens for the 2021/2022 Autumn and Spring Term were higher than regional and national averages.

The primary school absence rate in St Helens was 6.7% compared to the northwest average of 6.0% and 6.2% in England. The secondary school absence rate in St Helens was 10.2% compared to the northwest average of 8.8% and 8.6% in England.

St Helens also had higher rates of persistent absences for this period than regional and national average. The primary school absence rate in St Helens was 21.3% compared to 17.3% and 18.2% in the northwest and England respectively. St Helens' secondary school persistent absence rate was 31.6% compared with 27.3% and 26.7% in the northwest and England respectively.

It was reported that absenteeism affected learning, attainment, social and emotional well-being, and the life chances of those children and young people. For some, it was also a factor in safeguarding issues. It was agreed to scrutinise examples of work being carried out in three St Helens schools and to look at how the Council could support the work on improving school attendance across the borough.

A detailed overview of reports was presented to Members and discussion was provided within the report.

It was reported that five key recommendations were determined from the review, these being:

- Develop a borough-wide culture and expectation that every attendance matters;
- Each year deliver Every Attendance Matters campaign;
- Establish a multi-agency 'Behavioural Attendance Board' and an annual School Forum 'Every Attendance Matters';
- Continue to focus on children's mental and emotional well-being;
- Write to the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Education to emphasise the impact of funding reductions on Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) completion.

It was agreed that Recommendation 5 be revisited, in relation to EHCP completion by a meeting between the Chair and senior staff in Children's Services being convened.

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\* **Resolved that:**

- (1) **the report be noted;**
- (2) **recommendations 1- 4 of the Task Group be approved; and**
- (3) **recommendation 5 be revisited, in relation to EHCP completion, by a meeting between the Chair and senior officers in Children's Services being convened.**

### **25 CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23**

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 Chair confirmed the agenda items for the next meeting as indicated in the work programme, and summarised other scrutiny work areas that had and were due to take place.

\* **Resolved that the report be noted.**

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