

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of this Committee held on
24 April 2023

- (Present) **Councillor T Long (Chair)**
Councillors CD Banks, McCormack, Maguire, Osundeko, Sims and Sweeney
- (Also Present) **Councillor Charlton, Cabinet Member Children and Young People**
Councillor Groucutt, Cabinet Member Economy, Business and Skills
- (Not Present) **Councillors J Banks, Greaves and Sheldon**
- Mr C Williams (Roman Catholic Church Representative)**
Mr D Thorpe (Church of England Representative)
Miss A Kirman (Parent Governor – Primary)
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26 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Banks, Greaves and Sheldon.

27 **MINUTES**

- * **Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 9 January 2023, be approved and signed.**

28 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No Declarations of Interest from Members were made.

29 **DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIP**

No Declarations of party whip were made.

30 **DIRECTORS REPORT ON PROGRESS IN CHILDRENS SERVICES**

A report was presented which provided an overview of progress in Children's Services, highlighting the inspection of the Youth Justice Service by HMI Inspectorate of Probation in November 2022, the Ofsted monitoring visit in December 2022, findings from a peer review of the Public Law Outline in January 2023, and an update on progress made with the Children's Improvement Plan, which was updated in February 2023.

It was reported that this had been a busy period for the service, with the Youth Justice Service inspection in November 2022, and Ofsted Monitoring visit in December 2022, and a peer review by Bolton Council of St Helens Public Law Outline (PLO) practice and processes in January 2023. On top of this St Helens had also had the annual conversation with Ofsted in March 2023.

The service was also implementing the Workforce Strategy and managing staffing issues following the exit of the last Innovate team. The service had a strong focus on recruitment and retention of social work staff, with the first tranche of international social workers joining the local authority this spring.

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Priorities from the Children's Improvement Plan continued to be achieved, including practice improvement across the service, and an improved focus on achieving permanency for children, evidenced through the feedback from the recent monitoring visits in July and December 2022.

Further peer reviews were being undertaken throughout the spring, with Fostering and Kinship Care in March 2023, the Care Leaver Service in April 2023 and Children We Look After in April/May 2023. All of this activity was in preparation for the next full Ofsted inspection, namely the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILAC), which was likely to be later on in the year.

The report provided a detailed update of progress in respect of:

- Ofsted Monitoring Visit 13 and 14 December 2022;
- The Youth Justice Service (YJS) Inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation;
- Peer Review of Public Law Outline (PLO);
- School Attendance; and
- School Support/Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND).

The letter summarising the findings of the monitoring visit to St Helens Children's Services on 13 and 14 December 2022 was attached to the report at Appendix 1 and the YJS inspection report by HM Inspectorate of Probation was appended to the report at Appendix 2.

In conclusion, it was reported despite the continued high level of demand for services, Children's Services were evidencing improvements and progress across all areas. The judgement of 'Good' awarded to the Youth Justice Service showed a team's ability to change and improve, through a relentless focus on delivering a service where good outcomes for children and good quality practice was prioritised. This was now being shown and evidenced across Children Social Care and Education Services.

Also, it was added that it was a very busy and demanding time for the service, preparing for both the ILAC and SEND inspections, as well as three peer reviews and increasing demand and complexity of work for the staff. The workforce remained stable, committed and focused to the improvement work ensuring the best outcomes possible for the children and families.

Following the provision of a verbal overview of the report, the following comments and questions were raised

- Members commended the innovative practice, joined up systems and organisational arrangements that had been developed and welcomed the impact of quality assurance framework processes in improving social work practice standards;
- recognition was also afforded for the positive findings in relation to the YJS inspection and thanks were expressed to staff for their dedication and commitment;
- following a request, information was provided to detail several actions to address the issue of recording of information which the inspectors highlighted as still requiring improvement, the recruitment of social workers/fostering and adoption workers to vacant staffing positions and an update was provided on the progress

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of international social worker recruitment, their terms and conditions of employment and access to support packages;

- concern was expressed over the 11.5 vacant staffing posts that existed in the Duty Team service, and following discussion it was agreed that a recommendation be made to be taken forward on what more could be done to attract and recruit suitable experienced staff to the posts. It was stressed that this was a budgetary consideration which would need to be considered through the appropriate decision making process;
- in terms of social work retention, it was confirmed that no bonus was in place for retention of staff. However, ways of retaining staff were always being explored and St Helens compared favourably with neighbouring boroughs with the handling/response to the issue;
- in response to a question, the key areas were outlined of practice work that needed to be undertaken or were ongoing, in an attempt to reverse and prevent the trend of children going into care. Also, it reported how the work of partners would link with improvements;
- ongoing audit checks and processes were in place to mitigate the risk of inaccuracies in the automated recording of information;
- reassurance was provided that the YJS staffing was now much more stable, as was social worker staffing;
- work had been undertaken to ensure improved partner attendance at meeting and forums, such as the Youth Justice Board;
- ongoing work was highlighted to capture whether staff felt valued; and
- the benefits of purchasing properties for care home use to bring services back 'in-house'.

The Director of Children's Services was thanked for the thorough and comprehensive report.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the report and progress achieved be noted; and**
- (2) a recommendation be taken through the appropriate decision-making process to determine what action could be undertaken to resolve the 11.5 vacant staffing posts in the Duty Team.**

31 PERFORMANCE REPORT – QUARTER 3 2022-23

The Quarter 3 Performance Report 2022-23 was presented and provided an analysis of progress and performance over the period April to June 2022 against the Children and Young People Services priorities. The report reflected the new Performance Framework and targets aligned to the priorities and outcomes of the Borough Strategy as agreed by Cabinet at its meeting 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 and 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.

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It was reported that there were 88 performance indicators, where targets had been set, reported in the Quarter 3 Performance Report 2022-23. Of these:

- 73% of indicator targets had either been exceeded, met fully, or met within 95% of target. This compared to 75% of indicators in the previous quarter and 66% at Quarter 3 in 2021/22;
- 27% of indicator targets were not met. This compared to 25% of indicators in the previous quarter and 34% of indicators at Quarter 3 in 2021/22;
- Over the course of the last 12 months, 52% of indicators showed improvement, 7% of indicators maintained the same performance and 41% of indicators showed a downward trajectory. The position was a decrease on the position in Quarter 3 of 2021/22, where 54% of indicators showed improvement; and
- 24% of all indicators where comparison was possible were in the top quartile, compared to 39% at Quarter 3 of 2021/22, whilst 27% were in the bottom quartile, compared to 32% at Quarter 3 of 2021/22.

In summary, at Quarter 3 there were a number of areas where performance against outcomes was either some distance from the Quarter 3 target or an outlier in terms of St Helens performance relative to the England average of the nearest neighbours.

These areas included three outcomes within Priority 1 – ‘Ensure children and young people have a positive start in life’.

The Quarter 3 Performance Report 2023-23 at Annex A provided an assessment of the Council’s performance over the period October to December 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.

Following the provision of a verbal overview of the report, which focused on progress towards addressing areas of variance from target in some key indicators and on the key challenges, comments and queries were raised as follows:

- in response to concerns raised over variance from target for the performance indicator in respect of the percentage of Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans, it was confirmed that an action plan was in place to address the key issues and the challenges within the service area were acknowledged;
- it was clarified that there was Council representation on the appropriate committee that linked with the Homestart charitable organisation to facilitate early help for families in need, with the aim of avoidance of an escalation to child protection plans;
- it was confirmed that the performance data in terms of the ‘smoking status at the time of delivery’ performance indicator related to tobacco rather than also including vaping products and that evidence would need to be rigorously monitored to determine and conversations undertaken on whether vaping should be promoted as a healthier alternative to tobacco;
- the public health support work and campaigns were outlined in relation to advice and interventions in schools and with parents to promote healthy eating;

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- the referral process into the HENRY (Health, Exercise and Nutrition for the Really Young) programme was explained; and
- assurance was given that additional support was provided where higher social worker case loads existed because of fluctuating periods, and that case loads were carefully monitored.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the performance position at Quarter 3 be noted; and**
- (2) the actions planned by the Children and Young People Services to address specific areas for performance improvement in relation to Priority 1 be noted.**

32 IMPROVING EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS TASK AND FINISH GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS UPDATE

A report was provided to update Members on the progress associated to the recommendations from the Improving Employment Opportunities for Looked After Children and Care Leavers Task and Finish Group report, which explored work opportunities for care experienced young people.

The Children and Young People's Scrutiny Group received the report in June 2021.

On 23 June 2021, Cabinet approved the action plan and resolved that the response to the recommendations be submitted to the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee on 12 July 2021.

Since that time, services had continued to develop for care experienced young people, with several very positive developments, in turn leading to performance which compared favourably to both statistical neighbours and national data.

The recommendations from the Task and Finish Group alongside the relevant actions from the service to date was attached, in tabular format, to the report.

It was reported that four of the recommendations had been completed, with the remaining three recommendations being partially completed at the current time.

An update of progress and activity towards completing those three recommendations by the agreed completion date was provided by the Assistant Director, Children's Social Care.

Members were pleased with the response to this piece of scrutiny work that had been undertaken and its positive impacts.

Whilst discussing the key issue of ensuring the aspiration of care leavers was built into the Council's care, ongoing work and strategies were explained and it was reported that a piece of work was to be undertaken with the aim of ensuring that every care leaver had an opportunity of employment within the Council, alongside partnership working with businesses to ensure care leaver received offers of employment.

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The importance of collective working was stressed in terms of collective working between all aspects of services provided by the Council and partners to ensure wrap around support to care leavers in ensuring parentage.

Thanks were expressed to all members and staff input on this piece of work and the response provided to date.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the report be noted; and**
- (2) the progress of actions associated to the recommendations of the Improving Employment Opportunities for Looked After Children and Care Leavers Task and Finish Group report be noted.**

33 IMPROVING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE SPOTLIGHT REVIEW

A report was provided which presented this Committee with the findings from the spotlight review 'Improving School Attendance'.

The report was a summary of the evidence that was submitted to the Children and Young People Services Task Group, Improving School Attendance in St Helens. It concluded with five recommendations to ensure that a culture of "Attendance Matters" was developed as a borough wide obsession linking into the priority contained within the Council Strategy of "Ensuring Children and Young People Have a Positive Start in Life".

The Improving School Attendance Spotlight Review Recommendations were attached to the report at Appendix 1.

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.

At the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 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 both regional and national averages.

The primary school absence rate in St Helens was 6.7% compared to the northwest average of 6% 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 averages. The primary school persistent absence rate in St Helens was 21.3% compared to 17.7% 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.

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Absenteeism affected learning, attainment, social and emotional well-being, and the life chances of these children and young people. For some, it also factored as a safeguarding concern relating to criminality and various forms of exploitation. It was agreed to scrutinise examples of work being carried out in three St Helens schools and to look at how the Council supported the work on improving attendance across the borough.

An overview of the reports presented to task group members and discussions undertaken was provided.

It was confirmed that local authority attendance officers had been bought in by schools to undertake specific casework and tracking exercises had been done to demonstrate that their inputs had improved attendance.

It was explained that, in future, the DfE guidance recommended that all schools should receive a service offer from school attendance welfare officers to improve attendance, which would be achieved and delivered by the attendance team operating under the Triage, Education Support and Specialist Advice to schools (TESSA) model to offer early help, support and guidance. Bespoke support could be provided to schools at a cost.

Discussion also took place upon how good practice could be shared amongst schools to improve attendance alongside media campaigns, various professional staff forums and the involvement of school governors.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) **the Task Group report and recommendations as set out in Appendix 1 be approved; and**
- (2) **the recommendations be submitted to Cabinet for response.**

34 **REDUCING TEENAGE PREGNANCY IN ST HELENS SPOTLIGHT REVIEW**

A report was provided which presented the evidence submitted to and findings of the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee Spotlight Review 'Reducing Teenage Pregnancy Rates in St Helens' held on 5 December 2022 and 26 January 2023.

Based on the Committee's findings the main purpose of the report was to contribute to strategies to reduce teenage pregnancy rates in St Helens, thereby reducing inequalities; improving the well-being, life chances, and aspirations of children and young people; and reducing their potential of vulnerability to harm.

It concluded with 12 recommendations which linked to and supported the first of the six borough priorities "Ensure children and young people have a positive start in life."

The Reducing Teenage Pregnancy Rates Spotlight Review Recommendations were attached to the report at Appendix 1.

At the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee Work Programme Workshop on 6 July 2022, Members noted that the Under 18 conception rate in St Helens was the fourth highest in England at 27 per 1000.

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Members also noted that the under 18 teenage (15–17-year-olds) live birth rate in the borough of St Helens was the second highest out of 23 northwest local authorities, and the sixth highest in England out of 152 local authorities, at 8.2 per 1,000.

Although all young mothers wanted to do their best for their children, and some did very well, teenage pregnancy overall continued to have a significant impact on inequalities including on education, well-being, and life chances, and was a factor in the cyclical prevalence of disadvantaged families.

Members therefore felt that a spotlight review of strategies to reduce teenage pregnancies in the borough would be useful.

An overview of the reports presented to task group members and discussions undertaken was provided.

Members commended the impressive media campaign produced and delivered by the Teenage Action Zone (TAZ) sexual health team and congratulated the staff involved.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) **the Task Group report and recommendations as set out in Appendix 1 be approved; and**
- (2) **the recommendations be submitted to Cabinet for response.**

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

The Children and Young People Services Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2022-2023 was provided to Members.

It was reported that most items on the Work Programme had been covered, with three topics remaining which this Committee may wish to consider as priorities in the new municipal year.

It was confirmed that a piece of work would be undertaken at a Task and Finish Group meeting on Friday, 28 April 2023 to focus on reducing alcohol and substance misuse during pregnancy.

Members were thanked by the Chair for their work over the 2022/2023 municipal year along with Cabinet Members, staff and partners for their support.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) **the report be noted; and**
- (2) **consideration be given to covering the three remaining work items as a priority in the next municipal year.**