

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of this Committee held on
16 October 2023

(Present) **Councillor T Long (Chair)**
Councillors CD Banks, Greaves, Maguire, Osundeko, Sims, Sweeney
and van der Burg

(Not Present) **Councillors McCormack and Murphy MBE**

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

12 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors McCormack and Murphy MBE and Mr Thorpe.

13 MINUTES

* **Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 6 September 2023, be approved and signed.**

14 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No Declarations of Interest from Members were made.

15 DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIP

No Declarations of party whip were made.

16 DIRECTORS REPORT ON PROGRESS IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES

A report was presented by the Assistant Director Children's Social Care, which provided an overview and update of progress in Children's Services, including the outcome and recommendations of the ILAC inspection July 2023 and plans to take the service to Outstanding. The report also highlighted progress and developments towards the SEND inspection.

Members acknowledged that it had been a busy period, with the ILAC inspection in July 2023 grading Children's Services as Good overall, with Outstanding in Care Leavers, preparation for the SEND inspection and future planning for children services to sustain continues improvements.

Ofsted ILAC findings and report stated, 'Since judgement of inadequate for overall effectiveness of the last inspection in 2019, St Helens children's services had been on an improvement journey. Monitoring visits found that this was initially too slow in delivering improvements for children. A new senior leadership team began work in 2022.

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Since then, there had been a determination to improve at pace, and a renewed focus and impetus which had led to significant improvements in all areas. Children and young people in St Helens now benefitted from much better help, support, and care. Concerns were identified and addressed more swiftly, and children's situations improve'.

They recognised 'Leaders have improved their understanding of the quality of frontline practice by developing a robust quality assurance framework, by ensuring that they hear regularly from the children's workforce and from children, young people, and their families, and by engaging in peer reviews. This has led them to invest in improving practice and in developing specialist roles and resources that are effective in helping children and their families'.

Children's needs were identified and responded to swiftly at the lowest possible level.

Most problems were prevented from escalating. When concerns did escalate, immediate action was taken to safeguard children. Children who were looked after by St Helens made good progress and young people who were leaving care received outstanding support.

However, some children in St Helens had experienced neglect for too long, and service improvements were not leading to better experiences for all children. Leaders had credible and realistic plans to further improve service effectiveness.

The key recommendations from ILAC were:

- the effectiveness of the response to children experiencing neglect;
- the timeliness of entering pre-proceedings for children who need this support;
- the response to 16 and 17 year olds who are homeless;
- the stability and consistency of children's social workers; and
- safeguarding of disabled children.

The Director's update also included a summary of developments in respect of:

- future planning;
- Children's Update;
- workforce;
- sufficiency programme;
- school attendance; and
- SEND;

In conclusion, it was reported that Children's Services were continuing with their improvement trajectory and could evidence progress across most areas. Challenges still existed within the placement/sufficiency arena, but progress had been made in creating the Council's own internal residential homes, and it was now entering the tendering stage, inviting external organisations to run its children's homes on its behalf.

The decline in numbers around Child Protection plans and pre proceedings was welcome in respect of statutory reporting and highlighted the work undertaken to prevent children entering care.

This quarter had also seen a focus on Early Help, ensuring those in greatest need were able to readily access services. This work would be ongoing over the next few months as

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the Children's Services looked at how the service would interlink with the Family Hubs and support families more, thus preventing children entering statutory services.

The Assistant Director, Children's Social Care was thanked for the thorough and comprehensive report.

Comments and questions were raised as follows:

- in response to a question about the plans/strategies in place to improve the experiences and progress of vulnerable children/children in care who needed support and protection, it was confirmed that an Early Help Strategy and Early Help Board had been established, with joint working practice involving the Early Help Service and family hub. Thresholds continued to be looked at and it was explained how they would be monitored to ensure the correct interventions took place at the right times;
- it was explained that ongoing work was in place to strengthen the 'Edge of Care' offer together with other strategies to protect vulnerable groups, with re-assurance being provided upon the monitoring arrangements for all of the improvement work via monthly performance meetings and quality assurance performance frameworks and a number of specific forums, which all linked to a Children and Social Care plan which was subject to scrutiny and challenge by the newly established 'Getting to Outstanding' Board;
- in response to a question raised about how lessons were learned from children who had been through the care system and how to ensure those children did not return to that system, it was explained that the multi-agency Children's Safeguarding Partnership made Neglect the overarching priority for the current financial year and lessons had been learned from case reviews that the Partnership had undertaken, with staff training opportunities being made available arising from those reviews, via the use of nationally recognised tools;
- it was also confirmed that targeted work also needed to be undertaken to link in with the overarching Neglect strategy;
- clarification would be provided to the Committee about whether DFE guidance 'Working Together to Improve School Attendance' had become statutory legislation;
- an update was provided upon the Sufficiency Programme, outlining the impact of establishing local placements via the local growth of children's homes, the anticipated timescales involved, along with how solo placements would be delivered;
- re-assurance was provided that potential properties to be procured as part of the sufficiency strategy were fully checked for suitability from a children's social care and safety perspective in terms of the locations;
- the timeline for the completion of family hubs was confirmed;
- in response to a question raised about the ILAC inspection judgements around home schooling and impact on attendance, it was confirmed that Ofsted judgements in this area were not shared. However, within the Council there was a reporting process to monitor home schooling, the impact on attendance and to ensure the safeguarding of children and young people that were home educated; and
- it was confirmed that improving school attendance was one of the three key 'obsessions' as part of the new Children's and Young People's Plan. Members requested that the Assistant Director of Education & Learning be tasked with providing an update/briefing note on Pupil Attendance following the recent spotlight review recommendations, to include information on how severe pupil absence was being addressed.

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* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the progress achieved to date be noted; and**
- (2) an update be provided on pupil attendance following the recent spotlight review recommendations, to include information on how severe pupil absence was being addressed.**

Councillor CD Banks left the meeting during consideration of the following item.

17 QUARTER 1 PERFORMANCE REPORT 2023/24

A report was submitted which provided an analysis of progress and performance over the period from 1 April to 30 June 2023-24 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 26 April 2023. This framework provided the basis for quarterly performance reporting to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny over the course of 2023-24.

The Quarter 1 Performance Report 2023-24 was appended and reflected performance over the period April to June 2023 and the legacy impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, rising demand for services and a requirement to deliver significant budget savings. As a result, it was more critical than ever that the Council had a clear understanding of what it needed to measure and how it was performing to inform effective decision making.

There were 84 performance indicators, where Quarter 1 performance against target was available to be reported. Of these:

- 81% of target indicators had either exceeded, met fully, or met within 95% of target. This compared to 73% of indicators at Quarter 1 2022-23;
- 19% of indicator targets were not met. This compared to 27% of indicators at Quarter 1 2022-23;
- the trend measure indicated over the course of the last 12 months 51% of indicators showed improvement, 13% of indicators maintained the same performance and 37% showed a downward trajectory (percentages rounded to the nearest whole number). The position in Quarter 1 2022-23 was that 46% of indicators showed improvement, 6% of indicators maintained the same performance and 48% of indicators showed a downward trajectory; and
- 21% of all indicators where a comparison was possible were in the top quartile, compared to 35% at Quarter 1 2021/22, whilst 24% were in the bottom quartile, compared to 32% at Quarter 1 2022/23. 21% and 33% of indicators were in the second and third quartiles respectively, compared to 14% and 19% in Quarter 1 2022-23.

In summary, at Quarter 1 2023-24 there were a number of outcome areas which demonstrated strong and/or improving performance. Equally there were areas where performance against outcomes was either some distance from target or an outlier in terms of St Helens performance relative to the England average of its statistical neighbours.

Areas of challenge included:

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Priority 1

- the children's social care outcome: This included rates of Children In Need, Children Looked After, and children and young people subject to a Child Protection Plan for a second or subsequent time where current performance was statistically significantly higher than last published England averages and that of St Helens nearest neighbours. The percentage of Children Looked After ceased due to Special Guardianship Order (SGO) was also below target at Quarter 1 and third quartile compared to St Helens' statistical neighbours;
- the children's aspiration and attainment outcome: This included the timeliness of EHCP completions and the percentage of young people Not In Education, Employment or Training (NEET); and
- the children's health and resilience outcome: This included the number of teenage conceptions for which St Helens had the seventh highest rate in England. Under- 18 hospital admissions for alcohol, breastfeeding rates and MMR vaccination take up for five-year-olds remained statistically worse than last published England averages and the performance of St Helens' nearest statistical neighbours.

Comments and main points were raised in relation to Priority 1 performance indicators as follows:

- information was provided upon how the cost-of-living crisis was impacting on families in terms of Public Health and Children's Social Care services, mitigations, winter planning measures and demand on services/support being offered;
- in relation to performance indicator PH-008 'percentage of children ages 5 with MMR vaccination (two doses)', it was clarified that although performance had dipped in Quarter 4 compared to local targets, St Helens still performed slightly higher when compared to regional and national data;
- an update was provided upon the current developments within the Teenage Action Zone (TAZ) outreach service;
- the step-down process from Child Protection stage was clarified; and
- the activity and ongoing work to prevent increased numbers of children on child protection plans was outlined.

* **Resolved that the performance position at Quarter 1 2023-24 be noted.**

18 UPDATE ON THE EDUCATION, HEALTH AND CARE PLAN (EHCP) PROCESS AND ITS IMPACT IN ST HELENS

A presentation was delivered to provide Members with contextual/performance information and the current trajectory of the processes for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP's).

The presentation covered:

- regional benchmarking (St Helens performance outcomes compared with the North West Regional average and England average);
- 2022/23 capacity;

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- recovery; and
- monitoring

It was reported that regional benchmarking tabulated information (2019-2022), as detailed in the presentation, held the most recently available EHCP data for the North-West region.

Of the 23 Local Authority Areas shown in the data:

- 14 Local Authorities, (60%) had a performance figure lower than the regional average;
- 10 Local Authorities, (43%) had a performance figure lower than the national average; and
- St Helens was also the highest performing Local Authority in both 2020 and 2021.

Members were advised of background contextual information around 2022/23 capacity issues affecting EHCP timeliness of assessments, and noted the information provided showing the impact throughout 2023/23 using graphical data to indicate the rate of EHCP's, excluding exceptions, issued within 20 weeks.

In terms of performance recovery, it was reported that due to a successful programme of recruitment and the resultant capacity increase, the number of final EHCP's issued by the team was increasing steadily, as was the proportion of plans meeting the 20-week deadline. The SEND team had issued more EHCP's between January to September 2023 than in the whole of 2022, another indicator that performance generally was recovering.

Graphical data was provided to illustrate the improvement in EHCP timeliness on a month-by-month basis for 2023, it being reported that in July 2023 just over 15% of all plans issued were completed within 20 weeks compared to just over 6% in January 2023. It was added that if the recent improvements could be maintained, a return to the national average was achievable by the end of 2023.

Regarding the monitoring of performance, it was advised that a SEND data dashboard had now been built which provided real time 'at a glance' data across a range of key SEND metrics, which would allow EHCP performance to be monitored as well as providing key trend information and analysis to support any SEND local area inspection Key Lines of Enquiry. The SEND data could be overlaid with other Education and Learning Service Dashboards to support wider strategic planning and resource deployment.

Members thanked the officer for the report and welcomed the opportunity to understand the contextual information provided around EHCP delays.

Comments were raised on the following:

- concerns were raised about ineffective communication issues with families in the past around EHCP progress, with an explanation of how improvements to the assessment process would be made with better communications, increased staffing capacities, staff accessibilities and the introduction of a general SEND helpline;
- in response to a question around the avoidance of losing high quality staff, it was reported that a number of recruitment and retention strategies had been implemented, including staff development opportunities and improved ways of working;
- in response to a question which asked about whether ongoing work included an understanding of lived experiences, it was explained that peer and wider review

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activity had been undertaken with external partners along with multi-agency audits to capture key themes and areas for learning; and

- a statement on the current position in St Helens around the number of educational psychologists was provided, along with ongoing recruitment work to bolster staffing numbers within the team.

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

19 **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.

Members noted the items for consideration at the next meeting, and the Scrutiny Support Officer was tasked with ensuring that Aspirations and Employment Opportunities for Children and Young People be added to the item entitled 'Listening to the Voices of Children and Young People in St Helens'.

The Scrutiny Support Officer was also tasked to provide a calendar invitation for the Child Neglect Spotlight Review to take place on Monday, 12 February 2024.

* **Resolved that:**

- (1) **the outcomes of the work programme process undertaken by members and officers for the 2023/23 municipal year based on the prioritisation process and topic selection criteria, as set out in the report, be endorsed;**
- (2) **the Scrutiny Support Officer to ensure that Aspirations and Employment Opportunities for Children and Young People be added to the item entitled 'Listening to the Voices of Children and Young People in St Helens' to be considered at the next meeting; and**
- (3) **the Scrutiny Support Officer to provide a calendar invite to members for the Child Neglect Spotlight Review to take place on 12 February 2024.**