



Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

10 October 2022

Report Title	Children's Services Improvement Plan
Cabinet Portfolio	Children and Young People Services
Cabinet Member	Cllr Nova Charlton
Exempt Report	No
Reason for Exemption	N/A
Key Decision	No
Public Notice issued	N/A
Wards Affected	All
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Borough Priorities	Ensure children and young people have a positive start in life	X
	Promote good health, independence, and care across our communities	
	Create safe and strong communities and neighbourhoods for all	
	Support a strong, thriving, inclusive and well-connected local economy	
	Create green and vibrant places that reflect our heritage and culture	
	Be a responsible Council	X

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report summarises the Ofsted monitoring visit to St Helens children's social care on 27th and 28th July 2022.

2. Recommendation for Decision

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

- i) Note Ofsted Monitoring Letter**
- ii) Note the improvements that have been achieved and the continued Improvement journey that the services is on.**

3. Purpose of this report

- 3.1 To report to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee on the outcome of the Ofsted monitoring visit that occurred on the 27th and 28th of July 2022.

4. Background / Reason for the recommendations

- 4.1 St Helens children's services were inspected by Ofsted in 2019 and received a judgement of inadequate. Since then, there have been four 'monitoring visits' which allow inspectors to judge the progress made by the authority in improving children's social care. The monitoring visit in July had the specific function of reviewing the progress made on 'planning for and achieving permanence for children', which were identified as areas of concern in the last inspection.
- 4.2 This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. The visit was carried out fully onsite with inspectors meeting with social workers, managers and leaders, and talking to children and their carers.
- 4.3 Inspectors do not give judgements after monitoring visits as they do after longer inspections, but it is clear from the lead inspector's feedback letter that they have identified evidence in St Helens of improved quality in practice and outcomes for children. In the specific areas outlined, there are more positive findings detailed than areas for improvement. This is a significant achievement and reflects the hard work done by staff at all levels in the last few months.
- 4.4 The headline findings are that the pace of change in the local authority has been too slow since the previous full inspection in 2019. However, inspectors highlighted that there had been significant churn in the 'children we look after' service, resulting in some children having experienced delay in achieving legal permanence. They also stated that there was evidence of progress, in that there are early signs of an increased pace in practice with children, and some children are now achieving permanence in a timelier way.
- 4.5 Inspectors also acknowledged a change in leadership, with a new Director of Children's Services in post since June, and a permanent Assistant Director of Social Care in post for three weeks. They have been proactive in reviewing the quality of social work practice and outcomes for children. In the last three months, they have reviewed the local authority's self-assessment, including their plans for children achieving permanence. They now have a more accurate understanding of what needs to change to improve the services for children and ultimately their experiences.

- 4.6 Leaders have acted to strengthen their oversight, and the support that they give social workers, to enable them to carry out their duties more effectively. They have also proactively targeted resources and this has had an immediate impact in reducing social work caseloads in some areas. It has also improved the quality of some social work practice.
- 4.7 The inspectors noted that this reduction in caseloads means some social workers have been able to complete highly effective pieces of direct work with children and their carers, which are leading to more timely completion of permanence for some children. Children seeking long term permanence in St Helens are starting to experience more stability with their social workers and this helps them as they do not have to keep sharing their story with new people.
- 4.8 Social workers told inspectors they are very positive about working in St Helens. They spoke of the recent welcome changes, including more visible senior leaders, engagement in improvement work and feeling that their voices are heard. One social worker said that there is no hierarchy, and they spoke proudly "that there is now a sense that they are all in this together, working to get to the finish line".
- 4.9 Targeted training and intensive support for social workers, through the improvement team, have been effective in improving some social work practice. Social workers report they value the inputs from this team and that the training is having a positive impact on the quality of their assessments of children's needs.
- 4.10 Other positive comments by inspectors included that when children come into care they make good progress socially, emotionally and educationally, and an appropriate range of permanence options are considered for children.
- 4.11 Social workers know the children they work with well and can articulate their needs clearly. Children are visited in accordance with their needs and these visits are purposeful, with children knowing why their social worker is speaking with them.
- 4.12 The voice of the child is sought and recorded well. Children contribute to their review meetings, either in person or through their social worker, independent reviewing officer (IRO), or carers. This means their views are being heard by professionals and taken into consideration when planning for their future, when appropriate. One young person told inspectors they felt listened to and that this means that they now see the people who are important to them.
- 4.13 Some areas for improvement were highlighted by the inspectors, including current tracking systems, to monitor permanence planning for children, do not give sufficient assurance to leaders that drift and delay are being addressed effectively.
- 4.14 The increase of social work vacancies and sickness during 2021 meant that social workers had too many children on their caseloads to complete the work necessary to achieve permanence for all children. The plan for permanence for some children has not been achieved because of too many changes of social worker, a lack of pace and ineffective management oversight.
- 4.15 Some children's care plans are not always clear, they lack timescales and actions are not specific enough. This means that for some children, their families, and the professionals who work with them are not provided with a clear understanding of what they are working towards or when this should be achieved.

- 4.16 Decision-making for children to return home to parents is not always based on an up-to-date assessment of the child's needs and their parents' ability to meet those needs. For some children, however, good quality assessments have supported them to successfully return home to their parents' care
- 4.17 Social workers and IROs now address reviews and plans to the child, but the quality of the written records is not consistent. Too many records include language and content that is not child friendly, and they shift perspective between the first and the third person. This will be confusing to read and potentially distressing for children who choose to access their records when they are older.
- 4.18 A revised quality assurance framework has been agreed but not yet implemented, and in the meantime, leaders have put in place a regime of dip sampling and thematic reviews of areas that they are concerned about. They have also ensured that team and senior managers meet regularly to review the performance data. However, without regular case file auditing of all areas, leaders cannot be fully assured of the quality of practice across children's social care services and the impact on children's outcomes

5. Consideration of Alternatives

N/A

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 This Ofsted monitoring visit shows there has been a concerted effort in St Helens over the last few months to ensure better quality social work practice, and improved outcomes for children. Inspectors have highlighted progress by staff at all levels, and the dedicated focus given by senior leadership to drive through improvements in St Helens. They have also observed that staff are enthusiastically onboard with the improvement agenda, which is of great significance, as it shows willingness to engage with the changes needed since the 2019 judgement of inadequate.
- 6.2 The monitoring visit also highlights that there are still areas that need a determined focus to ensure improvements are made. It is evident that the drive and impetus needs to intensify so that the next full inspection by Ofsted shows a continuing trajectory of improvement.

7. Legal Implications

7.1 N/A

8. Community Impact Assessment (CIA) Implications

8.1 N/A

9. Social Value

9.1 N/A

10. Sustainability and Environment

10.1 N/A

11. Health and Wellbeing

11.1 N/A

12. Equality and Human Rights

12.1 N/A

13. Customer and Resident

13.1 N/A

14. Asset and Property

14.1 N/A

15. Staffing and Human Resources

15.1 N/A

16. Risks

16.1 N/A

17. Finance

17.1 N/A

18. Policy Framework Implications

18.1 N/A

19. Impact and Opportunities on Localities

19.1 N/A

20. Background Documents

20.1 Ofsted Monitoring Visit Report July 22

21. Appendices

21.1 Children's progress update