



CYPS Scrutiny Committee

9 January 2023

Report Title	Improvement progress in Children's Social Care since July 2022
Cabinet Portfolio	Children and Young People
Cabinet Member	Councillor 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	

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of the improvement journey in St Helens Children's Social Care in the last six months.

2. Recommendation for Decision

- 2.1 None

3. Purpose of this report

- 3.1 To provide an update on progress to the Children's Scrutiny Committee.

4. Background

- 4.1 The last Ofsted monitoring visit in July 2022 and a subsequent meeting with the DfE in August were positive in that they both evidenced the pace of improvement in St Helens. Since the summer, Leaders, Managers, and staff have worked extremely hard to build on that momentum, and there is evidence of improved quality of practice and that the impact of our work with children and families is improving outcomes.
- 4.2 The demand for our services is increasing, we have 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 is a challenging time for vulnerable families as levels of child poverty are rising due to the cost-of-living crisis. We are seeing the impact by the increased numbers of contacts and referrals to our services (see Appendix 1 on the Autumn Statement)

5. The Impact of Leaders

- 5.1 The CYPS Leadership Team has been stable since June/July and is providing focused and proactive management and leadership to Children's Social Care and the wider department. There is a particular focus on improving the quality of practice, as well as ensuring there is a permanent well supported workforce, and that resource issues such as lack of in-house foster care placements are currently being addressed.
- 5.2 Oversight of our performance and progress has been strengthened. The Self-Evaluation Framework (SEF) has been reviewed and leaders monitor the quality assurance framework and resulting activity on a regular basis. Senior leaders chair the performance support meeting which is held monthly and attended by managers and data leads.

Involvement of corporate and political leaders in the social care improvement journey is evident through the Children's Improvement Board, Scrutiny Committee, and the Corporate Parenting Forum. Five workstreams have been devised in conjunction with children in care / care leavers and are led by elected members.

- 5.3 The senior leadership team have focused on delivering regular staff engagement sessions. Staff have fed back that they are confident in the leadership, and they are happy with the increased visibility and approachability.

6. Partnership Working

- 6.1 The Safeguarding Children Partnership is being refocused by the Director of Children's Services in dialogue with the Lead external Scrutineer to ensure there is a strategic oversight and reach by the three partners (Children's Services, Health, and the Police). A review of Neglect undertaken by the partnership will be completed by January 2023 and a conference to publicise the findings and build solutions will take place in March.

- 6.2 The Early Help Strategy, which has been developed in collaboration with the multi-agency partnership is about to be launched and will provide a clear framework for improvement and development of multi-agency working. The aim is to unify and support all sectors and improve the preventative work that community-based services are well placed to achieve.

- 6.3 The development of Family Hubs is intrinsic to this, St Helens have been awarded funding of 2.9 million, and work is being done at pace, with the first building being identified, strategic and operational boards initiated, and a multi-agency partnership of 30 organisations formed.

- 6.4 Partnership working around domestic abuse, and contextual safeguarding has embedded well and continues to be a priority.

7. Workforce and recruitment

- 7.1 From December 2022 all managers from Team Manager upwards were employed on permanent contracts, with no agency managers now required. There is a continued focus on recruitment, with innovative solutions being employed. A web-based portal has been developed, followed by a recruitment event in February, with the first cohort of prospective overseas social workers to be interviewed the second week in December 2022.

- 7.2 In terms of staff retainment, terms and conditions have been improved, there is a comprehensive induction programme, and the Improvement Team are providing a relentless focus on improving practice through staff development and training. Practice Standards were published in October 2022 and staff are benefiting from training and development which includes whole team training sessions and one to one support if needed. Turnover of staff has decreased, it is now 8%, an improvement of 17% in April. Staff sickness levels have also decreased, they are now at 1.4%, as opposed to 6.3% in April 2022.

- 7.3 The ASYE programme has been revitalised, with group supervision, mentoring and learning sessions provided, and there is a good feedback mechanism to monitor progress and concerns. 100% of ASYE have completed their induction and have a mentor.
- 7.4 Learning and practice opportunities are being increased, through a collaboration with the Cheshire and Merseyside Teaching Partnership, and work is ongoing with local colleges and universities to provide placement opportunities within children's service.
- 7.5 International Social work recruitment is underway with the first cohort of interviews last week and hope that the first team of social workers will start in January. This will mean we can exit the final innovate project team. A comprehensive induction and support package will be delivered to the social workers when they commence work in St Helens.

8. Quality Assurance

- 8.1 The revised quality assurance framework (QAF) is now functioning well and provides a good quality insight into practice. Collaborative case audits ensure a more rounded picture of practice, and contain observation of practice and insight from partners, children, and families. Feedback from staff on the process is good. The quality of audits is improving, with less revision of grades. Audits completed in November 2022 had only 5% of grades changed after moderation, compared to audits completed in March 2022 which resulted in 28% of grades being changed.
- 8.2 Audits are showing improved quality of social work practice overall: Collaborative case audits completed in November show 96% graded as requires improvement or good (RI 67% G 29%) This shows an improvement from the last set of CC audits completed in September, where 91% were RI or Good.
- 8.3 Quality of practice has improved. Audits done this autumn on assessments show 80% were good or requires improvement; audits of plans show 95% were RI, good or outstanding; audits on the quality of visits and Voice of the Child show 90% were graded RI or good. In terms of management oversight and supervision 80% showed good quality, and 89% showed reflection and follow up of actions. This is evidence that our relentless focus on 'Being Brilliant at the Basics' is having an impact.
- 8.4 The feedback from audits to managers and practitioners via supervision is embedded, with a form developed to allow actions from audit to show on the next supervision record.
- 8.5 Results of audits have also informed training and development for staff, delivered by the Improvement Team. Recent training has included contingency planning, family networks and improving the quality of danger statements and safety plans.

8.6 However, there is still more that needs to be done:

- Continue the relentless focus on improving the quality and consistency of practice, using the QAF to identify areas where practice does not meet the agreed standards.
- Future training, arising from the most recent set of audits will include professional curiosity and evidencing impact and outcomes.

9. Children in need of help and protection

Early Help

9.1 There is a continuation of the high levels of need, the number of Early Help contacts have doubled since 2019 (pre pandemic). In 2019/20 there were 1320 and in the last 12 months there have been 2653.

9.2 The Early Help service has undergone a restructure and is now able to evidence an improvement in practice quality. All team members have completed level 4 training in working with complex families.

9.3 Delivery of evidence-based programmes such as Domestic Abuse Recovering Together and Triple P and Incredible Years parenting support are driving the support of families and preventing escalation of needs.

9.4 However, there is still more that needs to be done:

- A more focused multi-agency response to Neglect.
- Improve the partnership ownership and understanding of Early Help.
- Implementation of the Domestic Abuse strategy.

10. MASH and Front Door

10.1 The number of contacts and referrals into CSC continues to be high. Regular threshold meetings are held to analyse and provide feedback to referrers, to ensure inappropriate referrals are minimised. The rate of referrals per 10,000 children is 720. This has increased from 615 in 2021/22, and is higher than our statistical neighbours, and the England average.

10.2 An independent domestic abuse advisor has been recruited to MASH and will provide an extra level of support and advocacy for families where DA is prevalent. Improvements in practice with homeless 16- and 17-year-olds means vulnerable adolescents are becoming looked after where appropriate and are no longer housed in insecure temporary accommodation

10.3 We have seen a decline in our re-referral rates from nearly 28% in April 2021, to 20% in October 2022. This is lower than the Northwest average of 24% (qtr. 1 22/23) and is evidence that more children are receiving the right support at the right time from us.

10.4 However, there is still more that needs to be done:

- Improve the child in need pathway to ensure there is no drift and delay and that social workers are supporting children and families to improve outcomes and prevent levels of complexity from rising.
- We are developing a revised assessment pathway, to include a midway meeting – this will ensure there is a plan and actions for the child, and they are receiving support whilst the full assessment is being completed.

11. Assessment Teams

11.1 The assessment teams have experienced no decline in terms of demand, and there are a high number of children in court proceedings. On average 50% of children move from pre-proceedings into proceedings.

11.2 However there has also been a focus on proactive work with family networks and we are noticing good levels of children being subject to Special Guardianship Orders. In 21/22 there were 27 and so far this year there have been 17 SGOs. Family group conferences (FGC) and family network meetings are held at an earlier stage to facilitate this. A total of 143 children who are on CiN and CP plans have been allocated to a FGC worker. There are also a cohort of children who are placed with family and friend foster carers, enabling them to keep the connections with their family networks. There are 59 connected carer households, nearly 50% of the total of St Helens carers.

11.3 A private fostering action plan has been developed and implemented, and there is now a toolkit which helps social workers provide consistent support for children who are being privately fostered.

11.4 However, there is still more that needs to be done:

- Strengthen the multi-agency partnership for children on child in need plans with a focus on recognising and responding to neglect and preventing escalation of need.
- Improve the oversight, management, and utilisation of the practice model within child protection conferences by Conference chairs.

12. Achieving Permanence

12.1 The system to track children to ensure we plan and achieve permanence for them has improved. Senior managers have oversight from an early stage, via a Legal Gateway panel and a Permanence Panel, and a form has been developed on ICS to track progress for individual children.

12.2 Improved practice and rigorous tracking have resulted in cases being concluded quicker.

A judge said: "I thank the local authority, in particular the allocated social worker, who have worked very well with this family and brought about an outcome that benefits the children, they have done so within the 26 weeks and the social worker has, with a very busy case load, made sure everything was in track so that these proceedings could end today." In data terms, the average length of proceedings in the Cheshire and Liverpool family court is 57 weeks, but for St Helens the average time is 32 weeks.

12.3 The number of children we look after, while decreasing at the beginning of the year is now on the increase. There were 483 children in care at the end of November 2022, at a rate of 130 children per 10,000. This is almost double the England rate, which is 70 per 10,000.

12.4 We are still advocating for older children and those with complex needs to be adopted. Where appropriate the LA has facilitated open adoptions where children can have direct contact with members of their birth family. This is a really good outcome for children and the adults involved in their care.

12.5 However, there is still more that needs to be done:

- Work with the courts to ensure that the backlog of children whose court cases have been delayed is acted upon to enable children to achieve permanence.
- Increase the numbers of in-house foster carers able to take children whose permanency plans are long term foster care.
- Develop and recruit a cohort of 'specialist' foster carers who will have the skills and expertise to look after children with more complex needs, to prevent them from being placed in children's homes.

13. Complex safeguarding and exploitation

13.1 A contextual safeguarding pathway has been developed with a 'one child one plan' initiative, which means children subject to exploitation now have integrated assessments, care plans and LAC reviews to ensure better consistency and outcomes, and a greater understanding by professionals of the issues they face.

13.2 The Multi-agency partnership has better oversight of contextual safeguarding and are ensuring a more responsive support package is provided to those children and young people who are subject to exploitation.

13.3 Direct work has been completed with children in schools to help them understand what exploitation is and to recognise when they are being exploited.

13.4 However, there is still more that needs to be done:

- Ensure young people over the age of 18 who are subject to exploitation are supported.
- Train parents, foster carers, SG carers, school teachers and pastoral staff on recognising, responding to and protecting children who are being exploited.

14. Vulnerable adolescents

14.1 The Youth Justice Service has undergone an inspection by HMIP, and the feedback received is positive. The actual judgement is embargoed until February 2023. The service has been successful in reducing the number of first-time entrants to the criminal justice system quarter 2 data in 222/23 shows only 6 young people entered the CJS. In quarter 2 19/20 this number was 14. We are utilising our 'child first' approach, which ensures all young people who are supported by the YJS are able to access extra interventions to prevent them offending, prevent re-offending, and to resettle and support them if they receive a custodial sentence. Services include speech and language therapy, emotional wellbeing support, substance misuse support, mentoring, victim and restorative justice work, support to attend education and training, or to gain employment and physical health check-ups.

15. Children in care and care leavers

15.1 The new Corporate Parenting Strategy written in conjunction with children and young people in care, and care leavers has been launched. There are five workstreams each led by an elected member.

A programme of participation and engagement events took place to ensure we were actively encouraging participation by the children we look after and hearing their voices.

15.2 IRO's are working in a more focused and consistent way, they are escalating drift and delay in achieving permanence, and consistently including children and young people in their LAC Reviews.

15.3 The care leaver hub is successfully engaging care leavers, with up to a third of them (50 young people out of 150) utilising the resource. They were offered advice and guidance around benefits, employment and housing. There is also a foodbank and a clothes bank on the premises which they can use.

15.4 At the end of October 2022 92% of statutory visits were on time, and 91% of statutory reviews for looked after children in the last year were completed on time.

15.5 However, there is still more that needs to be done:

- Implement the sufficiency strategy by increasing the recruitment of in house foster carers and the development of children's homes in St Helens.
- Develop the Lifelong Links project to provide children in care and care leavers greater support through family and friends networks and increase their social capital.

16. The Improvement Team

16.1 All social work teams have benefited from the excellent support they have been given by the Improvement Team, which includes whole team sessions, lunch time learning, one-to one support, training, and induction for new social workers. This ensured that there was a targeted focus on improving the quality of practice in St Helens. Recent audits have shown improvements in every area of practice, evidencing progress on the journey to being 'Brilliant at the Basics.'

17. Consideration of Alternatives

17.1 N/A

18. Conclusions

18.1 Despite rising demand and the very complex children and families social workers are working with, there is evidence that good practice is being embedded in every team.

18.2 All staff are supported by managers who provide oversight and guidance through supervision and management oversight, and leaders who are providing the resources and culture for good practice to thrive.

18.3 The improvement journey in St Helens is moving at pace, Leaders are aware however that we must not taper off the pressure and we must remain intensely focused on improvement and improving the lives of vulnerable children and young people in St Helens.

19. Legal Implications

19.1 N/A

20. Community Impact Assessment (CIA) Implications

20.1 N/A

21. Social Value

21.1 N/A

22. Sustainability and Environment

22.1 N/A

23. Health and Wellbeing

23.1 N/A

24. Equality and Human Rights

24.1 N/A

25. Customer and Resident

25.1 N/A

26. Asset and Property

26.1 N/A

27. Staffing and Human Resources

27.1 N/A

28. Risks

28.1 N/A

29. Finance

29.1 N/A

30. Policy Framework Implications

30.1 N/A

31. Impact and Opportunities on Localities

31.1 N/A

32. Background Documents

32.1 N/A

33. Appendices

33.1 Appendix 1 The Autumn Statement

33.2 Appendix 2 Children's Improvement Plan