

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of this Committee held on  
10 October 2022

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

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

**(Not Present)**     **Councillor 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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### **9        APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

No Apologies for absence were received.

### **10       MINUTES**

\*        **Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 25 July 2022, be approved and signed.**

### **11       DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No Declarations of interest from Members were made.

### **12       DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIP**

No Declarations of party whip were made.

### **13       CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

A report was submitted to summarise the Ofsted Monitoring visit to St Helens children's social care on 27 and 28 July 2022. The letter from Ofsted detailing the headline findings was attached to the report together with a summary of the areas to improve.

St Helens Children's Services were inspected by Ofsted in 2019 and received a judgement of inadequate. Since then, there had been four 'monitoring visits' which allowed inspectors to judge the progress made by the authority in improving children's social care.

The monitoring visit in July 2022 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.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework. The visit was carried out fully on site with inspectors meeting with social workers, managers and leaders, and talking to children and their carers.

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Inspectors did not give judgements after monitoring visits as they did after longer inspections, but it was clear from the lead inspector's feedback letter that they had identified evidence in St Helens of improved quality in practice and outcomes for children.

In the specific areas outlined, there were more positive findings detailed than areas for improvement. This was a significant achievement and reflected the hard work done by staff at all levels in the last few months.

The headline findings were that the pace of change in the local authority (LA) had 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 were early signs of an increased pace in practice with children, and some children were now achieving permanence in a timelier way.

Inspectors also acknowledged a change in leadership, with a new Director of Children's Services in post since June 2022, and a permanent Assistant Director of Social Care, in post. Both had been pro-active in reviewing the quality of social work practice and outcomes for children.

In the last three months they had reviewed the local authority's self-assessment, including their plans for children achieving permanence. They now had a more accurate understanding of what needed to change to improve the services for children and ultimately their experiences.

Leaders had acted to strengthen their oversight, and the support that they gave social workers to enable them to carry out their duties more effectively. They had also proactively targeted resources and this had an immediate impact in reducing social work caseloads in some areas. It had also improved the quality of some social work practice.

The inspectors noted that this reduction in caseloads meant that some social workers had been able to complete highly effective pieces of direct work with children and their carers, which were leading to more timely completion of permanence for some children.

Children seeking long term permanence in St Helens were starting to experience more stability with their social workers and this helped them as they did not have to keep sharing their story with new people.

Social workers told inspectors they were 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 were heard. One social worker said that there was 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".

Targeted training and intensive support for social workers, through the improvement team, had been effective in improving some social work practice. Social workers reported that they valued the inputs from this team and that the training was having positive impact on the quality of their assessments of children's needs.

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Other positive comments by inspectors included that when children came into care they made good progress socially, emotionally and educationally, and an appropriate range of permanence options were considered for children.

Social workers knew the children they worked with well and could articulate their needs clearly. Children were visited in accordance with their needs and these visits were purposeful, with children knowing why their social worker was speaking with them

The Voice of the Child was sought and recorded well. Children contributed to their review meetings, either in person or through their social worker, Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) or carers. This meant their views were 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 this meant that they now saw the people who were important to them.

Some areas for improvement were highlighted by the inspectors, including that current tracking systems to monitor permanence planning for children, did not give sufficient assurance to leaders that drift and delay were being addressed effectively.

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 had not been achieved because too many changes of social worker, a lack of pace and ineffective management oversight.

Some children's care plans were not always clear, they lacked timescales and actions were not specific enough. This meant that for some children, their families, and the professionals who worked with them were not provided with a clear understanding of what they were working towards or when this should be achieved.

Decision making for children to return home to parents was not always based on up-to date assessment of the child's needs and their parents' ability to meet those needs. For some children, however, good quality assessments had supported them to successfully return home to their parents' care.

Social workers and IRO's now addressed reviews and plans to the child, but the quality of the written records was not consistent. Too many records included language and content that was not child friendly, and they shifted perspective between the first and third person. This would be confusing to read and potentially distressing for children who choose to access their records when they were older.

A revised quality assurance framework had been agreed but not yet implemented, and in the meantime, leaders had out in a regime of dip sampling and thematic reviews of areas that they were concerned about. They had also ensured that team and senior managers met regularly to review the performance data. However, without regular case file auditing of all areas, leaders could not be fully assured of the quality of practice across children's social care and the impact on children's outcomes.

Members were informed that overall, the findings were positive, with affirmation that the pace of improvement was now improving, having been too slow.

Questions and comments were invited from Members.

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A request was made for an update on current social worker caseloads.

It was reported that the position was much improved, with not many social worker caseloads greater than 20. The aim was to get as many as possible social workers carrying less than 20 cases, with the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (AYSE's) social workers case load to be less than 20.

In terms of recruitment, the situation was improving, with posts being filled and advertised which had also helped with bringing down caseloads. Regarding complexity of caseloads, it was reported that the more complex caseloads were assigned to more senior staff rather than those who were newly recruited. However, it was highlighted that most cases were of a more complex nature in the present day.

In response to a question about the tracking systems, it was clarified that it was an area that had been identified prior to the inspection visit, and some elementary work to improve tracking systems was continuing with the implementation and review of different panel systems in addition to paper systems.

A question was raised about whether there was a use of innovative digitalisation methods in recording processes, for example with children's life stories, in order to mitigate the impact of social worker change and for children to look back on when they were adults.

It was indicated that, whilst there was digitalisation in place to some degree, for example with children's pen portraits, it was agreed that there were exciting opportunities to be explored within that area, and it was agreed to pursue those opportunities further.

The Assistant Director of Children's Services outlined the panel systems that had been installed and explained the aims, support provided and function of each of those panel systems. Progress measures against the trackers were in place for the Pre-Precedings and Permanence elements whereby impact of work could be assessed.

An update was also requested upon the consistency and quality of written records. It was explained that work was ongoing in this complex area, as historically some records had been written for the child and some from the point of view of the author. It was explained that a consistent approach was being developed, with a further issue being the quality of written work linkage to quality of practice and the need to get all records to the same standard.

Members were provided with a clear timeline for the improvement journey, and they acknowledged the positive tone in language used in Ofsted's correspondence.

It was queried how the level of improvement would be maintained.

In response, it was explained that a Quality Assurance system was in place with a new Quality Assurance framework involving continuous, rigorous audit programmes which informed the quality of work being undertaken by a grading judgement. Additionally, dip sampling, thematic audit work, observations/assessments and monitoring also took place.

The use of the 'Innovate' project team external resource was also highlighted whereby the Council had utilised its staffing expertise. The recruitment of 20 international social workers from South Africa to commence in early 2023 would also bring a degree of staffing permanence. The issue of agency social workers deciding not to stay was highlighted due to the salary differences between agency pay rates compared with those

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of local authority employees. However, a targeted recruitment campaign was in place to attract agency staff to join the local authority social work staffing establishment.

Assurances were provided that thorough research had been undertaken in relation to the recruitment of the international social workers in terms of experiences of other local authorities, risk assessments, support packages (including peer to peer support) and induction programmes for those staff.

It was noted that the social worker staffing situation had stabilised with regular meetings taking place with Human Resources in regard to recruitment and retention processes and contract production, and that staffing permanency was critical to the improvement journey. It was also explained that a dashboard would soon be in place to accurately provide the detail of the level of staffing vacancies in the social work service area.

It was clarified that training courses were in place for case recording, and the methods used locally for good practice.

In response to a question, it was explained how social care service areas and educational service areas worked in partnership via a co-ordinated approach to support children, for example with Special Educational Need provision.

Details were also provided upon the strategies put in place to improve how assessment and care plans could be improved by using a key strategy of 'Being Brilliant at the Basics' to achieve good quality practice.

It was agreed that an email response be provided by the Director of Children's Services for questions in relation to Early Help provision.

\* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the Ofsted Monitoring letter be noted;**
- (2) the improvements that had been achieved and the continued improvement journey that the service is on be noted;**
- (3) the digitalisation of children's life stories be explored, to mitigate impact of social worker change and for children to look back on when they were adults; and**
- (4) a response be provided by the Director of Children's Services via email to the Scrutiny Committee in relation to Early Help Plans questions, namely:**
  - (i) information on the current position of implementation of the Ealy Help Plans;**
  - (ii) where the funding was up to in ensuring that they could be put in place; and**
  - (iii) whether or not there were plans to address the increase in the number of families who would need support in the winter months.**

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### 14 ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

A presentation was provided which detailed local data and contextual information and activities, programmes and plans in relation to Children's Healthy Weight and Access to Healthy Food, which was one of the Council's key priority areas.

The presentation detailed the following:

- National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP): Provisional data published 19 July 2022 for Reception and Year 6 trends in prevalence of obesity, severe obesity, overweight (including obesity), and underweight NCMP 2006/7 to 2021/22;
- Child obesity in the Northwest – Prevalence of obesity by region and age 2019/20 for children in Reception and in Year 6;
- Local comparative data 2019/2020 for St Helens with Regional which stated that 28.3% Reception Children recorded as overweight, which was higher than North West (25.2%) and England (23%) averages (2019/2020); and 41% Year 6 children were recorded as overweight, again higher than North-west (37.4%) and England (35.2%);
- St Helens Trends over time for Prevalence of overweight (including obesity) in Reception and Year 6 compared to national data;
- Evidence of what works – obesity in children and young people: prevention and lifestyle weight management programmes and list of quality statements;
- Common areas of obesity activity identified as part of a whole systems approach to obesity;
- Interventions in St Helens:
  - NCMP pathways for children in the 'overweight' and 'very overweight' categories who were referred into St Helens Wellbeing service;
  - Wellbeing service contact parent/carer to provide brief advice intervention and offer package of weight management support;
  - NHSE funded co-production project with parents/carers to gather parent voices to inform changes to the NCMP process;
  - Holiday Activity Fund (HAF) Programme – healthy snacks and drinks for children who were free school meal eligible (fsmse) outside of school time;
  - Resident engagement survey (summary of survey findings also detailed);
- St Helens Wellbeing service information, including the offer;
- Future Plans; and
- Information of the forthcoming World Food Day on 16 October 2022 which would involve requests for donations for local food banks, publicised and promoted digitally through the Council and partner sites.

The Public Health Consultant was thanked for the comprehensive and informative overview via the presentation and questions were invited.

The Chair indicated that she had visited the Healthy Food Programme during summer 2022 along with the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and saw how well engaged the parents, children and carers were.

In response to a question about the provision/ward coverage in the Borough of 'food pantries' for the most vulnerable residents so that healthy food could be accessed, it was confirmed that the 'food pantry' programme was developing with partnership working being undertaken with voluntary and faith sectors, and a dedicated team was analysing

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data to identify the most vulnerable groups and the localities in most need in order to prioritise support. Reference was made to a mobile unit that was currently in operation that could be used to transport food across the borough to ensure appropriate coverage to meet demands.

A question was also raised about the provision and monitoring of nutritional food standards in schools. It was confirmed, whilst there were no defined statutory standards laid out, that a number of school's bought into the Council's school's catering service, with rigorous monitoring and customer satisfaction exercises being undertaken by the head of service to ensure quality of food provision and variety. It was also clarified that Academies were included in meetings with the catering service and were afforded opportunities to buy into the service level agreements on offer.

The Assistant Director, Education and Learning provided information on educational activities and a project that had been developed with schools to work with children and parents that linked to the modelling of good pupil behaviour at family mealtimes/quality family time spent together, and cooking activities involving parents, including planning and budgeting for healthy ingredients. The project helped staff and senior leaders capture information received from parents on barriers that they faced in accessing healthy foods due to various constraints, such as availability at local shops and online shopping.

Members enquired how the project could be expanded, and it was outlined that canvassing of schools could take place and data could be analysed, for example localities data, to target Head teachers in schools where child obesity may be an issue with a view to securing engagement in the project at a wider level. Also, partnership working with groups such as public health and the localities group could achieve the expansion of the project.

It was agreed that the Assistant Director, Education and Learning undertake work with Head teachers to take forward the project to improve healthy eating in schools.

Members also discussed the role of school governing bodies in the involvement to develop and introduce projects in their schools, and requested they be included in any information being issued.

Following a proposal made, it was also agreed that an advice sheet be devised and promoted/publicised to parents so that they could be informed of how to access healthy food if they were struggling to do so. The Public Health Consultant agreed to take the action to the Healthy Weight group.

Discussion also took place around the provision of an inclusive approach/collective working with families, for example via the use of community spaces for parents to access healthy food, promotion of healthier food choices and undertake educational opportunities around healthy food production. The Public Health Consultant acknowledged that there were some opportunities to involve family hubs and children's centres within a programme to utilise all assets that were available locally.

It was confirmed that the Family Cooking Programme was in place and was an offer provided by the Wellbeing service, whose staff were experienced in terms of qualifications, Health and Safety and statutory requirements.

Information was provided on how the uptake of the Wellbeing service, which supported 389 children in 2019/2020, could be improved and it was confirmed that updated,

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finalised, local data was due in November 2022 and would be shared with Members by email along with more information on the HENRY Project.

\* **Resolved that:**

- (1) the presentation be noted;**
- (2) an advice sheet be produced for parents and carers on how to access food at any time of need;**
- (3) a timetable be provided for mobile food pantry provision to Members to promote in their communities;**
- (4) the Assistant Director, Education and Schools be tasked to explore the potential for Healthy School Projects in schools; and**
- (5) updated local data be shared with Members by email, when available in November 2022, together with further information on the HENRY project.**

### **15 REVIEW (PROVISIONAL) OF SCHOOL OUTCOMES 2021/2022 OVERVIEW**

A presentation was provided which gave an overview of the provisional review of school outcomes in 2021/2022 and key topical areas.

The presentation provided information on:

- Education and Learning's Three Obsessions, those being attendance, reducing inequality and social and mental wellbeing;
- Academic outcomes for 2021/2022 (St Helens compared with national), which were broad headline figures and based on unvalidated data for:
  - Early Years Foundation Stage;
  - Year 1 Phonic Screening Check;
  - Key Stage 1;
  - Key Stage 2;
  - Key Stage 4;
  - Key Stage 5;
- Plans and support for 2022/2023:
  - Band B support for eight schools;
  - Primary Achievement and Improvement Board meeting for 11 schools;
  - Secondary Achievement Board meetings for all secondary schools;
  - PALS group established;
  - Introduction for three new head teachers;
  - Ofsted briefing for St Helens head teachers and governors;
  - use of consultants to offer bespoke and tailored support and challenge (academic, attendance and wellbeing);
  - solution focused innovative projects working collaboratively with REES Centre and Vision 2000;
  - quality marks linked to attendance and personal development;
  - subject specific support, e.g. Maths and English consultants and use of Specialist Leaders in Education (SLE's) to network groups;
  - Head teacher information sharing session;
  - locality cluster group meetings; and



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- Governors' Forum
- Continuing Professional Development offer – Ofsted, transition conference and the week-long festival of learning focusing on relationships'
- Therapeutic Schools Award teaching modules around child mental health;
- Learning Partnership meeting;
- Statutory Compliance:
  - Awarding Body for Early Career Teachers;
  - Advice and support for ECT mentors and head teachers;
  - SACRE;
  - LA monitoring duties on behalf of Standards Testing Authority;
  - Phonics Screening Check and Key Stage 2 SATs;
  - LA moderation duties for Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 SATs. This involved recruitment, training and maintaining oversight of the moderation teams and leading scrutiny visits;
- Triage, Education, School Support and Advice (TESSA) Model - a new model of service provision with services being co-located and offering streamlined support, with a detailed explanation of how the model would operate;
- Family Hub Model; and
- Repurposing the use of Alternative Education.

The Assistant Director, Education and Learning was thanked for her comprehensive and informative report and Members acknowledged the amount of innovative work that was being undertaken.

Some concern was expressed over Year 1 Phonics Screening Check outcomes, which indicated a significant decline in the proportion of disadvantaged pupils across the borough in that year's expected standard of phonic decoding, which was down from 73% in 2019 to 55% in 2022.

In response it was indicated that the schools where issues had been identified were being challenged at Achievement and Improvement Board meetings over the phonics scheme that they had in place, and if it was the scheme as recommended by Ofsted. Specialist Consultants were also able to go into those schools to demonstrate what a good phonics session looked like.

Members acknowledged the pleasing outcomes at Level 5 GCE 'A' Level exams at grade A and A\* and enquired about equivalent Level three qualifications such as BTECs. It was explained that a piece of work was in place to develop relationships between education providers such as the local colleges and employers to develop appropriate qualifications.

A concern was raised in relation to the increasing number of pupil exclusions, and assurance was provided that appropriate challenge was in place towards Head teachers and would be made to school governing bodies over the issue in regard to their decision making and asking the appropriate questions. Also, under the new TESSA model of better working, the LA would have staff visiting the schools more often and undertaking an early intervention support mechanism. School to school support strategies were also mentioned which could be implemented to address some of the exclusion issues.

Discussion took place around pupil attendance issues that had been identified and it was confirmed that pupils absent during term time post pandemic due to family holidays was increasing and Members noted that a forthcoming spotlight review on attendance would be undertaken.

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- \* **Resolved that the Presentation be noted.**

### **16 SCRUTINY 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.

It was noted that Spotlight review meetings on Improving School Attendance and Reducing Teenage Pregnancy would be taking place on 3 November 2022 and 5 December 2022 (both 10.00am to 2.00pm) respectively.

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

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