



ST HELENS
BOROUGH COUNCIL

CYPS Scrutiny Committee

24 April 2023

Report Title	Directors Report on Progress in Children's Services
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
Report of	Hilary Brooks Director of Children's Services HilaryBrooks@sthelens.gov.uk
Contact Officer	Hilary Brooks Director of Children's Services HilaryBrooks@sthelens.gov.uk

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 provides an overview of progress in children's services, highlighting the inspection of the Youth Justice Service by HM 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.

2. Recommendation for Decision

- i) To note progress achieved.

3. Purpose of this report

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

4. Background

- 4.1 This has been a busy period for the service, with the Youth Justice Service inspection in November, an Ofsted Monitoring Visit in December, and a peer review by Bolton Council of our Public Law Outline practice and processes in January. On top of this we have also had the annual conversation with Ofsted in March 23.
- 4.2 The department is also implementing the Workforce Strategy and managing staffing issues following the exit of the last innovate team. The service has 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.
- 4.3 Priorities from the Children's Improvement Plan continue to be achieved, including practice improvement across the service, and an improved focus on achieving permanency for children, evidenced through the feedback from our recent monitoring visits in July and December 2022.
- 4.4 Further peer reviews are being undertaken throughout the spring, with Fostering and Kinship Care in March, the Care Leaver Service in April, and Children We Look After in April/ May. All of this activity is in preparation for the next full Ofsted inspection (ILAC), which is likely to be later on in the year.

Ofsted Monitoring Visit December 13th and 14th 2022

- 4.5 This was the fifth monitoring visit since the full inspection of Children's Services in 2019. The lead inspector in her letter highlighted a positive picture and identified evidence of improved quality in practice and outcomes for children. The monitoring visit reflects the focused work that has been happening in St Helens to accelerate improvement. The inspectors acknowledged the progress made since their last visit in July 2022 and since the inadequate judgement of 2019.
- 4.6 Leaders are relentlessly driving through the changes needed. Inspectors were impressed by the improvements in audits, quality assurance framework and performance monitoring to improve practice. They also highlighted how it was evident that management oversight is used to drive decision making and progress for children.
- 4.7 The inspectors noted that most assessments of children are informed by family history, trauma, cumulative harm and risks and protective factors for children. The child's voice is usually present. The quality of planning for children has improved since 2021, and when risks emerge, children are safeguarded appropriately.

- 4.8 Inspectors praised the Change Grow Live (CGL) service which educates parents to understand the impact their substance misuse has on their children and supports them to overcome their difficulties. Multi-agency meetings are well attended, and partner agencies contribute to children's plans. Some children benefit from purposeful direct work with their social workers.
- 4.9 Since the appointment of the Director of Children's Services (DCS) and Assistant Director (AD), prior to the monitoring visit in July, there has been a significant and renewed focus on quality assurance to understand the impact of social work practice for children's outcomes. Audit activity has increased, and the quality of audits are better. Leaders have implemented a robust learning loop that is understood by staff, therefore learning from audits improves social work practice. The Improvement Team was seen by inspectors as having a positive effect on social work practice, offering coaching and support to staff.
- 4.10 Areas highlighted by inspectors that still require improvement are: social workers are not always recording sufficiently their knowledge and interactions with children; too many children have experienced drift and delay in having their plans reviewed effectively and their needs met because of frequent changes of social workers and the 'start again' process. Some managers do not always identify and challenge social workers when children's plans are not progressing; partner agencies do not always challenge drift and delay when the plans for children do not progress; supervision records do not always reflect the depth of the discussions about children that happen between managers and social workers. These areas of development form part of our improvement plan.
- 4.11 Inspectors were pleased to note that social workers are positive about the visibility and accessibility of the new leadership team, their involvement in the improvement journey and that they feel valued by senior leaders and enjoy working for St Helens.

The Youth Justice Service (YJS) Inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation

- 4.12 The service was inspected at the beginning of November 2022. There was an acknowledgement by inspectors of the extremely challenging circumstances relating to staff vacancies and sickness the service has recently endured, as well as the tribulations of operating during the Covid 19 pandemic, and the resultant lack of face-to-face contact with children and young people.
- 4.13 Overall, St Helens YJS was rated as 'Good'. Of the 13 areas inspected, 8 were rated as outstanding. The quality of resettlement policy and provision was separately rated as 'Good'. The inspection found a strong service, with strengths evident across the casework for court disposals and out-of-court disposals, both of which were rated as outstanding across all elements of assessment, planning, delivery and implementation, and review. They highlighted that this is attributable to the 'colossal efforts of the staff and head of service.'
- 4.14 Inspectors found practitioners to be skilled, experienced, and resilient. They are able to build positive relationships with children, which translated into effective outcomes. Overall, they were impressed with the breadth and provision of partnership services, with children being able to access a range of interventions and support swiftly, alongside clear and specific pathways for universal, targeted, and specialist provision. Staff work together collaboratively and there are strong peer support networks across the service.
- 4.15 However, inspectors also noted that the service needs to make improvements to its governance and leadership. There has been a turnover of senior leaders and a lack of board attendance by all partners. Board chair arrangements have also been inconsistent over the previous 12-18 months. Inspectors found a disconnect between the board and frontline YJS practitioners, leading to many staff feeling undervalued. The Council has now appointed the DFE advisor Karen Bradshaw to chair the board and she brings her wealth of experience working within this area.

- 4.16 The recommendations arising from the inspection highlight that the YJ management board should:
- establish consistent and cohesive chairing arrangements and board membership.
 - develop individual and collective knowledge and understanding of board members' roles and the service's work and provide effective challenge to partners.
 - improve the relationship between the board and practitioners so that all can recognise how strategic priorities influence operational delivery.
 - provide the management team with the necessary staffing resources and ensure the necessary work is completed on the YJS building.
 - improve the analysis and use of data to shape strategic and operational delivery.
- 4.17 The latest Youth Justice Board (YJB) data reveals an overall reduction of first-time entrants to the criminal justice system in St Helens from 169 in April 2019 to March 2020 to 129 in April 2021 to March 2022. This is below the current England and Wales rate of 143. The data shows that there has been a steady decrease in reoffending, year on year. Despite this, St Helens' current reoffending rate of 39.2 per cent (October 2019 – September 2020) is still above the England and Wales average of 33.6 per cent.

Peer Review of Public Law Outline (PLO) January 2023

- 4.18 As part of the NW sector-led improvement arrangements, colleagues from Bolton Council spent three days in St Helens reviewing social work practice and processes relating to the public law outline, which is the framework by which decisions are made about children being removed from the care of their parents, and into the care of the local authority. The PLO consists of two distinct elements, Pre-proceedings, and Proceedings, when the case enters the court arena.
- 4.19 Strengths highlighted included, social workers know their children well; social workers and team managers were open within reflective discussions when discussing good practice and areas for development; management and Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) oversight within case files audited was strong in most cases; PLO procedures and oversight are strong within case files. Drift and delay are minimised; the quality of assessments was mostly good.
- 4.20 Peers also commented that the quality of assessments and child protection plans were sometimes inconsistent, better recording of management oversight is sometimes needed, some language can be punitive, and not always strength based, and the child's voice can be lost.
- 4.21 The PLO toolkit and monitoring and oversight was highlighted as being outstanding, with senior management (Head of Service) and the PLO Coordinator oversight a strength, clearly supporting timely decision making and reducing drift and delay for children. Similarly, the Legal Gateway Panel overview of Pre-proceedings is strong, and again reducing drift and delay.
- 4.22 Peers were impressed by the preventative work that stopped children going to court, which included a lot of resources to support families, the use of the strengths-based practice model and Family Group Conferences.
- 4.23 Areas for development included: in some cases, social workers needed to challenge decisions more, and for some cases social workers needed to spot repetitive patterns and cycles of concern, when thinking about families' capacity to change.
- 4.24 Overall, this was a very positive peer review, showing the consistent progress that has been made in this area of social work practice in St Helens.

Children's Improvement Plan update

- 4.25 We are continuing to see high levels of demand for our services, with the rate of CiN being 441 children per 10,000, which is higher than the Northwest average, but similar to our statistical neighbours. The number of Children and Family assessments completed is also high, with a rate of 1040. This equates to one child in ten. The rate of children subject to Child Protection Plans is 76 per 10,000 children, an increase of 32% since the same time last year. Currently there are 477 looked after children in St Helens, a rate of 129 per 10,000 children, this figure has stayed stable despite increases elsewhere.
- 4.26 Early Help is also experiencing high levels of contacts. Referrals rates have been increasing again, after decreasing most of last year. Work took place earlier in the year to analyse the reasons for the decrease in Early Help assessments and resources were reallocated to areas to ensure assessments were completed on time by partner agencies. Despite the high levels of demand, we are making progress against our Children's Improvement Plan, which is monitored every 6 weeks by the Children's Improvement Board, attended by the Leader, Cabinet Member and Chief Executive, and chaired by our DfE Advisor, Karen Bradshaw.
- 4.27 Our priority, 'Being Brilliant at the Basics' is showing good progress. Of case audits completed in January 95% were Good or Requires Improvement (45% Good, 50% RI), up from 90% in September. 100% had Good or RI assessments, Voice of the child, and chronologies, with 95% having Good or RI plans, supervision, and management oversight. The impact of the improvement team work can be seen, they have provided consistent training and support to social workers and managers in these areas.
- 4.28 Partnership working – this is improving. Thematic reviews of neglect and domestic abuse directed by the Safeguarding Children Partnership Board have been completed, with a multiagency conference organised for the spring, to disseminate the findings and increase engagement. Health, 95% of children having their health checks on time. 85% of children have completed their Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire, 8% higher than this time last year.
- 4.29 Workforce - To increase the numbers of permanent experienced social workers in St Helens our Workforce Strategy has been implemented. Weekly meetings with Human Resources to oversee and streamline processes; two recruitment fairs have been held, and the first cohort of international social workers will be joining the council in April.
- 4.30 Work is also underway with the colleges in relation to social work apprenticeships and the development of a 'grow your own' culture. Support for staff to aid retention has improved, there is a good training and development offer and wider staff engagement opportunities. There is now a staff engagement group made up from staff across children services, who are planning activities for the year ahead.
- 4.31 Quality Assurance – the new Quality Assurance framework is fully embedded throughout the department. A concentrated focus on the quality of audits has led to improvements. With collaborative case audits, 28% of grades were changed after moderation in March 2022, in September it was 13.6% and in November 5%. The Improvement Team continues to support individuals and teams on recognised themes that have arisen from audits. The progress relating to practice improvement is evident.
- 4.32 Permanency – a robust system for tracking permanency planning for children along with a new recording system has been implemented, to ensure the child's journey to permanence can easily be reviewed. 100% of pre-proceedings have been completed in 24 weeks this year while 72% have been completed in 16 weeks. The average length of proceedings in the Cheshire and Liverpool family court is 57 weeks, but for St Helens the average time is now 32 weeks.

We are attempting to increase the recruitment and retention of in-house foster carers, as part of our Sufficiency Strategy. There was a significant increase in enquiries following #Fosterfest; a series of public events run by the Fostering Service in January.

Of these there are currently eight potential new fostering households. A timetable of events has been drafted for the next 12 months to carry on the positive momentum around recruitment. Plans for new residential children's home are continuing. Discussion at Policy Cabinet in March was positive and a Cabinet report for funding for the homes is due in April.

The Fostering service has shown considerable improvement over the last few months in all areas. A dashboard has now been implemented to monitor performance and progress and this month showed all green.

School Attendance

- 4.33 In May 2022 the Department for Education published a Guidance document 'Working Together to Improve School Attendance'. The guidance sets out the responsibilities placed on the local authority and partners to improve school attendance, under the banner that improving school attendance is everyone's responsibility. The importance of good school attendance needs to be recognised across all of the Council's areas of responsibility, particularly across education services, early help, children's social care and the virtual school.
- 4.34 Fundamental to this guidance is the importance of engaging with children and families to understand the reasons for poor school attendance and improving it by implementing a multi-agency approach. The local authority have worked in partnership with all schools in the borough to identify those children who are persistently absent (below 90% attendance) and who they are concerned about. This work initiated a multi-agency response with improved joint working between schools and children's social care. Such work has contributed to the following improvements.
- 4.35 Since the autumn spring term 21/22:
- Reduced primary school overall absence by 1.7%
 - Reduced secondary school overall absence by 1.9%
 - Reduced special school overall absence by 3.4%
- 4.36 The local authority have now developed data dashboards that provide live school level data in relation to attendance, suspensions and exclusions, part time, timetables and elective home education. This data is also able to provide information on distinct groups such children in receipt of an Education, Health and Care Plan, those in receipt of free school meals as well as ward level data linked to indices of deprivation. The local authority uses this data to provide challenge and support to schools via the headteacher learning partnership meetings, school advice and improvements meetings and directly with schools.
- 4.37 More recently, the local authority has started to work with a Department for Education Advisor and have developed a local action plan which will drive forward the development of a borough wide attendance strategy, the implementation of a Behaviour and Attendance Board and the introduction of targeted support meetings between the Education Welfare Service and schools in the borough.

School Support/SEND

- 4.38 In keeping with the borough strategy priority 1 'Ensuring children and young people have the best possible start in life' the School Effectiveness Team have worked with headteachers to develop three 'Obsessions' focused on attendance, inclusion and wellbeing. Workstreams have been developed and have enabled LA officers and Headteachers to share successful, collaborative practice.

- 4.39 In order to ensure progress towards these priorities the team have held monthly cluster meetings for all schools to discuss LA developments, DFE guidance and localities workstreams. In addition, the team have held termly learning partnership board focused on an area of leaning around the three obsessions.
- 4.40 Those schools judged to be at risk of being judged as 'Requires Improvements' have been invited to Achievement and Inclusion Board (AIB) meetings and School Reviews, with a focus on Leadership and Management, Quality of Education, Personal Development, and overall effectiveness.
- 4.41 Where schools are deemed to be 'Requires Improvement' by OFSTED or where there are data and outcome concerns, the school will be placed into Band B and offered support and challenge. The team have hosted termly reviews for all 'Band B' primary schools, after which written reports have been produced and support provided from officers in curriculum design, behaviour management, leadership and management.
- 4.42 The Achievement and Inclusion Board (AIB) offer has been extended to schools previously judged to be 'Outstanding' and therefore previously exempt from the OFSTED framework. Through the AIB process, leaders are more prepared for inspection. They are able to explain their 2022 data and associated trends and therefore able to satisfy the LA with their plans for school improvement.
- 4.43 Throughout the course of the academic year there have been 17 Inspections. 2 schools have moved from RI to Good and percentage of schools judged to be good or better has increased from 86% to 92% with 51 out of 54 primary schools judged to be good or better.
- 4.44 In February 2023 a new model of support was launched which has seen the education and support services design and implement a more effective way of working. The TESSA model – Triage, Education Support and Specialist Advice to schools, ensures a single point of access and timely intervention by professionals. The model also allows for efficient data collection which illustrates emerging needs both in terms of description of need as well as locality pressures.
- 4.45 SEND, there is a new national SEND inspection framework being implemented, the service has undertaken training around the changes and a SEND improvement board has been established to monitor progress. The service suffered a loss of staff earlier in the year which has impacted on service effectiveness, however , the service it has now recruited to the vacant posts and is starting to show signs of improvement across all areas, especially around timeliness of EHCPs. We are currently awaiting our SEND inspection.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 Despite the continued high level of demand for services, Children's Services are evidencing improvements and progress across all areas. The judgement of 'Good' awarded to our Youth Justice Service' shows how teams ability to change and improve, through a relentless focus on delivering a service where good outcomes for children and good quality practice is prioritised. This is now being shown and evidenced across Children Social care and Education services.
- 5.2 It is a very busy and demanding time for the service, preparing for both the ILAC and SEND inspections, as well as 3 peer reviews and increasing demand and complexity of work for our staff. The staff remain stable, committed and focused to the improvement work and ensuring the best outcomes possible for our children and families.

6. Legal Implications

6.1 N/A

7. Community Impact Assessment (CIA) Implications

7.1 N/A

8. Social Value

8.1 N/A

9. Sustainability and Environment

9.1 N/A

10. Health and Wellbeing

10.1 N/A

11. Equality and Human Rights

11.1 N/A

12. Customer and Resident

12.1 Children Services are on a continual improvement journey since 2019. However, the services are seeing an increase in demand especially around poverty and neglect and is undertaking current strategies to address them.

13. Asset and Property

13.1 N/A

14. Staffing and Human Resources

14.1 Staffing is now stable within Children's Services. However, we still have a high degree of agency staff, and we are still awaiting the first cohort of international social worker recruitment.

15. Risks

15.1 N/A

16. Finance

16.1 Children's Services budget is approximately £60m per annum of which £27m is spent on placements. There is currently a £6m pressure on the budget with an action plan in place to address the shortfall.

17. Policy Framework Implications

17.1 N/A

18. Impact and Opportunities on Localities

18.1 N/A

19. Background Documents

19.1 N/A

20. Appendices

20.1 St Helens Ofsted Monitoring Visit of LA Children's Services

20.2 An inspection of youth offending services in St Helens