



Children and Young People Services Scrutiny Committee

6 September 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
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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 provides an overview of progress in children's services, highlighting the peer reviews undertaken since the last scrutiny meeting 24th April 2023. Along with improvements made within the service and work already being undertaken in respect of ILAC and SEND inspection preparation.

2. Recommendation for Decision

- i. To note progress achieved to date.

3. Purpose of this report

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

4. Background

- 4.1 This has been a busy period, two peer reviews have recently been undertaken, one in the Fostering Service by the LGA and one for the Children we look after service (CWLA) by Salford City Council as part of the North West sector led improvement offer.
- 4.2 The service still has a strong focus on recruitment and retention of social work staff. The first tranche of five international social workers joined the local authority in April, one more is due to join at the end of June and five more in the summer.
- 4.3 Priorities from the Children's Improvement Plan continue to be achieved. This month has shown another reduction on children subject to child protection plans and children in pre proceedings. There has also been a focus on achieving permanency for children, evidenced through the feedback from our recent monitoring visits and initial feedback from the peer review.

5. Peer Review Fostering

- 5.1 Following the independent review of the Fostering Service undertaken in April by the LGA, the Independent Reviewer made several recommendations which have been considered and accepted by the service.
- 5.2 The recommendations include.
- clarity of the 'offer' to foster carers incorporating support, training, benefits and fees and allowances with focus on harder to place children/young people
 - to undertake joint workforce development to clarify the roles and responsibilities of social workers across the fostering service, and reflected within records held for both the child/young person and the foster carer
 - to consider a preferred therapeutic model to underpin service delivery
 - to review the current mechanisms to capture the voice of the child
 - to continue with the roll out of audit activity to ensure learning is tracked
- 5.3 As part of the review a number of audits were undertaken, these have yet to be shared with the service, but verbal confirmation has been provided that there were no areas of concern identified.

5.4 Activity against the recommendations has commenced via an action plan and lead officers nominated. Progress will be robustly monitored through the existing management monthly performance meetings.

6. Peer Review CWLA

6.1 Following the CWLA peer review by Salford City Council as part of the North West sector led improvement offer in May 2023, the feedback to date highlighted the following strengths and recommendations.

6.2 Strengths

- Children who enter Care are presented at Legal Planning meetings.
- Young Peoples voices are heard within planning and are supported by professionals around them who can articulate their needs.
- Current trackers provide a clear overview of the Cared for Cohort.
- Tracking and Careplanning oversight was understood with all practitioners.
- There is consistent 'buy in' from all senior leaders and partners in attending relevant panels.
- There is a shared understanding, amongst all levels of the workforce, of the challenges facing families in St Helens and a desire to improve things.
- Workforce are confident in discussing families they are working with and know them and their wider networks well.
- Young people's voices are pro-actively sought with examples of established and emerging practice supported by the Participation Worker.

6.3 Recommendations for consideration/action

- Head of Service footprint to be more evident on file.
- IRO oversight, scrutiny and footprint to be supported by appropriate framework.
- Understand SGO breakdowns and identify opportunities for earlier support.
- Review effectiveness of panels and communicate any changes to the whole workforce and partners.
- Review understanding of permanency at the front door and identify and deliver any training need.
- Review opportunities to strengthen edge of care offer to support and scaffold existing placements and avoid unplanned admissions / disruptions.

6.4 Activity against the recommendations has commenced via an action plan and lead officers nominated. Progress will be robustly monitored through the existing management monthly performance meetings.

7. Children's Improvement Plan update

7.1 The children's improvement plan was updated June 2023. This demonstrates the level of activity within the service and the improvements achieved to date.

7.2 We are continuing to see high levels of demand, with the rate of CIN, 441 children per 10,000, which is higher than the North West 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. Currently there are 469 looked after children in St Helens, a rate of 129 per 10,000 children, this figure has stayed stable despite increases elsewhere in the region.

7.3 Child protection plans are down from 279 March 23 to 255 June, Children in care remains fairly stable 473 in March to 469 in June, placement with parents numberers were 42 in March down to 36 June, pre proceedings cases stood at 35 in March down to 20 in June.

- 7.4 The numbers of children and young people in residential provision has increased from 59 in March to 62 in June, these figures continual to be monitored weekly.
- 7.5 Partnership working – Thematic reviews of neglect and domestic abuse by the Safeguarding Children Partnership Board have been completed, along with the five workstreams for the year which link into the overarching priority of Neglect. A multiagency conference has been arranged for September, to disseminate the findings of both reviews.
- 7.6 Health - 95% of children have had their health checks on time. 85% of children have completed their Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire, this is 8% higher than this time last year.
- 7.7 Work is also underway with the colleges in relation to social work apprenticeships and the development of a 'grow your own' strategy. Last month we successfully interviewed four social worker apprentices to start in January and this compliments the two already within the process.
- 7.8 Quality Assurance - A concentrated focus on the quality of audits has led to improvements, with no overall grades changed at moderation, this is in comparison to 60% of changes via moderation in March 2023. The Improvement Team continues to support individuals and teams in relation to the themes that have arisen from audits. The progress relating to practice improvement is evident.
- 7.9 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.

8. School Attendance

- 8.1 The Department for Education guidance, 'Working Together to Improve School Attendance' was due to become statutory legislation by September 2023. However, this will not be in place before the beginning of the new academic year as originally planned and therefore the guidance will not become a statutory requirement from September. Notwithstanding the delay in the guidance converting to statutory legislation, the Council supported by the DFE have continued to make progress in line with the requirements of the guidance. Since the previous update to the CYPS Scrutiny Panel a joint 'Improving Attendance Action Plan' has been developed in partnership with the DFE. In addition, the member 'Spotlight Review' into improving school attendance in St Helens has set out a series of recommendations under the banner of 'Attendance Matters' to further support the partnership approach to improving school attendance.
- 8.2 Since the previous review, a multiagency 'Attendance and Behaviour Board' has been launched which provides support and challenge to schools and partner agencies to deliver on the overarching ethos of the guidance thus ensuring that good school attendance is everyone's responsibility.
- 8.3 Whilst there remain areas where absence rates reported for St Helens continue to remain above comparable national averages and much higher than the pre-Covid period, the autumn term figures do show areas of emerging improvements. For example, reductions in overall absence rates across the primary and secondary sectors, compared to the previous year, plus reductions in the percentage of persistent absentees for both primary and secondary schools. In terms of other areas to note there are increasing numbers of severely absent pupils (attendance below 50%) across all school sectors.

9. SEND

9.1 Please see separate attached reports regarding SEND for the quarter.

10. Conclusion

10.1 Children's Services are continuing with their improvement trajectory and can evidence progress across most areas. Challenges still exist within the placement / sufficiency arena, but progress has been made in creating our own internal residential homes, we are now entering the tendering stage, inviting external organisations to run our children's homes for us.

10.2 The decline in numbers around child protection plans and pre proceedings is welcome in respect of our statutory reporting and highlights the work undertaken to prevent children entering care.

10.3 The feedback from both peer reviews and their recommendations are currently being actioned across both services.

10.4 This quarter has also seen a focus on Early Help, ensuring those in greatest need are able to readily access our services. This work will be ongoing over the next few months as we look at how the service will interlink with the Family Hubs and support families more effectively, thus preventing children entering our statutory services.

11. Legal Implications

11.1 N/A

12. Equality Impact Assessment

12.1 N/A

13. Social Value

13.1 N/A

14. Net Zero and Environment

14.1 N/A

15. Health and Wellbeing

15.1 N/A

16. Equality and Human Rights

16.1 N/A

17. Customer and Resident

17.1 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 implementing current strategies to address them.

18. Asset and Property

18.1 N/A

19. Staffing and Human Resources

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

20. Risks

20.1 N/A

21. Finance

21.1 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.

22. Policy Framework Implications

22.1 N/A

23. Impact and Opportunities on Localities

23.1 N/A

24. Background Documents

24.1 N/A

25. Appendices

25.1 N/A