



Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

16 October 2023

Report Title	Directors Report on Progress in Childrens 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, since my last report 24th July 2023. It includes the outcome and recommendations of the ILAC inspection July 2023 and plans to take the service to Outstanding. This report also highlights progress and developments towards the SEND inspection.

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, with the ILAC inspection July 2023 which graded us as Good overall, with Outstanding in care leavers, preparation for the SEND inspection and future planning for children services to sustain continued improvements.
- 4.2 Ofsted ILAC finding and report states, 'Since a judgement of inadequate for overall effectiveness at the last inspection in 2019, St Helens children's services have been on an improvement journey. Monitoring visits found that this was initially too slow in delivering improvements for children. A new senior leadership team began work in 2022. Since then, there has been a determination to improve at pace, and a renewed focus and impetus which has led to significant improvements in all areas. Children and young people in St Helens now benefit from much better help, support, and care. Concerns are identified and addressed more swiftly, and children's situations improve.'
- 4.3 They recognised 'Leaders have improved their understanding of the quality of frontline practice by developing a robust quality assurance framework, by ensuring that they hear regularly from the children's workforce and from children, young people, and their families, and by engaging in peer reviews. This has led them to invest in improving practice and in developing specialist roles and resources that are effective in helping children and their families.'
- 4.4 Children's needs are identified and responded to swiftly at the lowest possible level. Most problems are prevented from escalating. When concerns do escalate, immediate action is taken to safeguard children. Children who are looked after by St Helens make good progress and young people who are leaving care receive outstanding support. However, some children in St Helens have experienced neglect for too long, and service improvements are not leading to better experiences for all children. Leaders have credible and realistic plans to further improve service effectiveness.
- 4.5 Recommendations
- The effectiveness of the response to children experiencing neglect.
 - The timeliness of entering pre-proceedings for children who need this support.
 - The response to 16- and 17-year-olds who are homeless.
 - The stability and consistency of children's social workers.
 - Safeguarding of disabled children.

Future planning

- 4.6 The Children's Improvement plan is being replaced with a new "Getting to Outstanding plan". This will include actions to address the recommendations above and the ambitions for the Sufficiency Programme, SEND and Early Help provision. We are currently transitioning the governance arrangements from the Improvement Board to an "Outstanding Board". This will be chaired by the Chief Executive and membership will include senior representation from both council and external partners who will drive the improvements and be accountable for the delivery and outcomes required to achieve outstanding at the next inspection.
- 4.7 From October the Assistant Director Social Care, will chair a monthly meeting with relevant leaders to focus on the tasks necessary for each service area to achieve outstanding status. This work will inform future iterations of the SEF and progress will be shared with the "outstanding Board" for scrutiny and challenge.

Childrens Update

- 4.8 We are continuing to see high levels of demand, with the rate of CIN on the 31st August 2023 being 459 children per 10,000 under 18-year-olds, which continues to be higher than the Northwest average (384), but comparative to our statistical neighbours (449). Currently there are 489 looked after children in St Helens, a rate of 132 per 10,000 children, this figure has shown an increase since March 2023.
- 4.9 Child protection plans have decreased from 280 children in March 23 to 237 in August 2023, however, the number of children in care has increased from 469 children in care in March 2023 to 489 children in care in August 2023. The number of children in care and placed with parents has remained broadly the same, decreasing marginally from 40 children placed with parents on the 31st March 2023 to 39 children placed with parents on the 31st August 2023. The number of children subject to pre proceedings has increased from 35 in March 2023 to 48 at the end of August 2023 that mean they are no longer looked after, however we have issued on several which has led to an increase in the overall number of proceedings.
- 4.10 The number of children in a residential placement has marginally increased since March 2023 with 64 children in a residential placement at the end of August 2023, these figures continue to be monitored weekly.
- 4.11 The number of Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) cared for by St Helens has increased from 12 children on 31st March 2023 to 21 children on the 31st August 2023.

Workforce

- 4.12 Four social work apprentices have commenced in September, with welcome meetings being held with DCS and AD. Two apprentices qualify in December and will be appointed into social work roles, whereupon a further two will take up apprenticeships.
- 4.13 Presently there are numerous staff onboarding which leaves a vacancy rate for social workers of less than 7%. Whilst 6 international social workers have started there are a further 7 still to arrive. There has been a back log with approvals from Social Work England that has caused delay we anticipate that we will see progress within the next few weeks.
- 4.14 A refreshed recruitment campaign emphasising the recent ILACs result, and positive staff morale is being launched. Several staff have participated in videos sharing their reflections of working in St Helen's.

We are also making good use of social media and other forums such as Community Care, MJ magazine and the local press to raise our profile with the intention of encouraging experienced social workers to complete our staffing establishment with permanent staff.

Sufficiency Programme

- 4.15 In recognition of the importance of securing safe and stable homes for our children who are looked after, we have established a dedicated internal Sufficiency Programme Lead to ensure that the Edge of Care service, children's homes growth, specialist foster homes and care leaver homes are developed at pace. Governance arrangements have been put in place with participation from relevant strategic leaders from across the council, with the DCS chairing to ensure that there is whole system accountability and that the individual projects are delivered within required timescales to achieve the Sufficiency Programme aims.
- 4.16 The internal children's homes project is progressing with two properties potentially being purchased in the very near future and plans to re-purpose the Grove moving forward. The tendering process is about to begin to secure a provider who will run the home on our behalf.
- 4.17 There has been a relentless focus on fostering recruitment. Since April 2023 there have been four households approved as mainstream carers, and 6 assessments are currently in progress with 12 post enquiry visits taking place that could lead to further assessments. Regarding specialist carers who will care for children with more complex needs, it is expected there will be 4 or 5 approved by early next year.
- 4.18 A robust, refreshed recruitment campaign is taking place during September which we hope will attract more interest and lead to further growth of our internal foster carers.
- 4.19 Simultaneously consideration is being given to determine which children currently placed outside St Helen's can move into local foster placements and the new homes. This will meet their needs for a local safe and stable home and reduce the expenditure on high-cost placements.

School Attendance

- 4.20 The Department for Education guidance, 'Working Together to Improve School Attendance' was due to become statutory legislation by September 2023. However, this remains in guidance form. 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.
- 4.21 As part of the ILAC's, the Education HMI analysed attendance data of all statutory school age pupils and conducted deep-dive activities linked to the attendance of children with a social worker and scrutinised the associated support and challenge posed by local authority officers. As part of the inspection, the team reviewed the council's processes in relation to 'elective home education', 'children missing education' and use of a 'part-time timetable. Considerable amounts of evidence were provided by officers and the inspectors were fully assured and satisfied with the processes and quality of information provided.
- 4.22 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 figures 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.

- 4.23 During the school's summer break, officers within education and learning have worked diligently and creatively to action requests made by from The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, Secretary of State for Education: Call to support strong attendance from the first day of term, July 2023. This has included contacting identified families and offering support and advice in relation to attendance, launching the council's media campaign and linking with external services to provide bespoke packages of support for young people.
- 4.24 As we move into the new academic year, there will be a continued effort to support and challenge schools to improve attendance across primary, secondary and special schools. This will happen through spot-light reviews where good practice can be showcased, attendance review boards and cluster group meetings. Improving attendance remains a key area of focus across education and learning teams; this involves engaging the wider partnership. For example, a presentation will be given to the Safeguarding Children's Partnership board highlighting the roles and responsibilities of key partners in ensuring there is a collective and collaborative approach to removing barriers and continuing to see an improvement in overall attendance figures.

SEND

- 4.25 The SEND team have been working closely with partners from across the local area to prepare for the new local area SEND inspection. They have designed a self-evaluation form which reflects the new framework and have been integral in establishing a multi-agency SEND inspection preparation group. This group has identified related workstreams, the work of which will be monitored by the SEND Partnership Board and the SEND Strategic Board.
- 4.26 Annexe A data is being collected and centralised and there have been training and briefing sessions delivered to partners around the new inspection framework and the expectations on them.
- 4.27 Vacant SEND caseworker roles have now been recruited to and the team is working diligently to improve the timeliness of EHCP completion. Completion rates from July suggest that the number of EHCPs completed in the 20-week timescale could be at national average by December 2023. A multi-agency audit tool has also been developed to ensure quality and value of cases.
- 4.28 The SEND team are working alongside the DfE, Newton Europe and CIPFA on Delivering Better Value (DBV) in the SEND programme. This programme will support the local authority and its partners to improve delivery of SEND services for children and young people whilst working towards financial sustainability. The team are being supported to identify the highest impact changes that can be made to improve outcomes for young people with SEND, and to optimise the use of finances. The local authority will receive dedicated technical support to create a plan to deliver improvement across the local system, which will build on existing initiatives and address underlying challenges in the SEND system.

5. Consideration of alternatives

- 5.1 N/A

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Children's Services are continuing with their improvement trajectory and can evidence progress across most areas. Challenges still exists 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.

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

6.3 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, thus preventing children entering our statutory services.

7. Legal Implications

7.1 N/A

8. Equality Impact Assessment

8.1 N/A

9. Social Value

9.1 N/A

10. Net Zero 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 Children Services have been on a continual improvement journey since 2019. The ILAC's demonstrates significant improvement resulting in the "good" outcome. However, the service is seeing an increase in demand especially around poverty, neglect and physical violence. This service is undertaking current strategies to address this and continue our improvement journey to outstanding.

14. Asset and Property

14.1 N/A

15. Staffing and Human Resources

15.1 Staffing is now stable within Children's Services. However, we still have a high degree of agency staff, and are looking forward to welcoming the second cohort of international social workers.

16. Risks

16.1 N/A

17. Finance

17.1 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.

18. Policy Framework Implications

18.1 N/A

19. Impact and Opportunities on Localities

19.1 N/A

20. Background Documents

20.1 N/A

21. Appendices

21.1 N/A