



# Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

8 January 2024

<b>Report Title</b>	<b>Directors Report on Progress in Children's Services</b>
<b>Cabinet Portfolio</b>	Children and Young People
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	Councillor Nova Charlton
<b>Exempt Report</b>	No
<b>Reason for Exemption</b>	N/A
<b>Key Decision</b>	No
<b>Public Notice issued</b>	N/A
<b>Wards Affected</b>	All
<b>Report of</b>	Hilary Brooks Director of Children's Services <a href="mailto:HilaryBrooks@sthelens.gov.uk">HilaryBrooks@sthelens.gov.uk</a>
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<b>Borough Priorities</b>	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 16<sup>th</sup> October 2023.

## **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 and Young People Services Scrutiny Committee.

## **4. Background**

- 4.1. Work continues this period with improvements across the service following Ofsted ILAC inspection July 2023, with a focus around the key main areas, sufficiency, demand strategy, family support and in Education, attendance, TESSA and SEND.
- 4.2. Placements and sufficiency have been a key issue, with the cost of external placements continuing to increase, placing further pressure and overspend on the budget. The landscape of residential care for children and young people has changed over recent years with the majority of homes being run by private companies. The market faces significant challenges relating to poor quality, high costs, and poor outcomes. In addition, the high reliance on the private sector for provision is driving up the costs of care significantly without commensurate rises in the quality of care.
- 4.3. This is reflected in local authorities across the LCR region, and indeed across the country, whereby expenditure on children's social care has grown by 41% compared to a decade earlier, even though the children's population has grown by less than 10% over the same period.
- 4.4. The average weekly cost is £5,000 and some complex placements in St Helens reaching nearly £14,000 a week; the media recently focused on a placement within LCR that exceeded £40,000 a week due to the complex needs of the young person and in Cambridge a placement of £85,000 a week.

## **5. Children's Data Update**

- 5.1. We are continuing to see high levels of demand, with the rate of CIN on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 2023 being 477 children per 10,000 under 18-year-olds, which continues to be higher than the Northwest average (387), but comparative to our statistical neighbours (439). Currently there are 485 looked after children in St Helens, a rate of 132 per 10,000 children, this figure has shown an increase since March 2023.
- 5.2. Child protection plans have decreased from 280 children in March 23 to 219 in October 2023, however, the number of children in care has increased from 469 children in care in March 2023 to 485 children in care in October 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 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 to 39 children placed with parents on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 2023. The number of children subject to pre proceedings has increased from 35 in March 2023 to 47 at the end of October 2023. However, we have issued on several which has led to an increase in the overall number of proceedings.
- 5.3. The number of children in a residential placement has marginally increased since March 2023 with 60 children in a residential placement at the end of October 2023, these figures continue to be monitored weekly.

- 5.4. The number of Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) cared for by St Helens has increased from 12 children on 31st March 2023 to 25 children on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 2023.

## **6. Fostering**

- 6.1. Work is underway in the Fostering service with recruitment of carers now standing at 13 assessments under way, in addition we have 2 specialist carers and by the end of the year it is hoped we will have managed to approve 15 mainstream carers, and 2 specialist carers a huge increase on last year, when only one carer was approved.
- 6.2. St Helens Council has agreed to be part of Foster 4, a collaborative service set up by Warrington, Cheshire West, Cheshire East and Halton. This collaboration has been successful in the implementation of the Mockingbird model, which has been used to model a successful DfE bid for Fostering Recruitment and Retention across the Cheshire and Merseyside region. This will expand the Mockingbird model across another four LAs in the LCR to establish and deliver a successful fostering recruitment partnership to improve foster carer training, recruitment and ultimately retention improving placements and outcome for children and young people.
- 6.3. The region has recently collaborated on, and submitted, a DfE Regional Care Co-operatives Pathfinder bid – where the regional bid is through to stage 2 of the process. The vision for this proposal is to significantly increase options for care locally.

## **7. Workforce**

- 7.1. Recruitment continues to be a challenge. A number of social work vacancies were planned to be covered by International Social Workers (ISW). However, the significant delay with Social Work England, the regulatory professional body, was not anticipated. On a positive note, the 7<sup>th</sup> ISW commenced on 13<sup>th</sup> November. Unfortunately, delay continues for a further 6 despite this being raised with Social Work England, the regulatory body.
- 7.2. The current permanent vacancy rate is 11%. Whilst this figure has not reduced in accordance with our expectations it does reflect that some of our social workers have secured promotional roles which has created additional vacancies.
- 7.3. Our current social worker agency rate is 23% that figure includes cover for vacant posts, maternity leave and posts under offer covered by these staff. We will release a further 9 posts once the new social workers are in post. This figure (23%) compares favourably within the NW region, where there has been a 62% increase in the agency worker rate since 2013, and a national increase of 29%. Agency usage impacts upon the financial resources available to support families, children and young people, by creating significant budget overspends in each of the councils across the Liverpool City Region. In St Helens, the projected budget pressure in respect of children's social care staffing costs is currently £2.2m.

## **8. Quality of Practice**

- 8.1. During Quarter 2 we have continued with our quality assurance programme. Overall, we continue to improve with notable improvement with plans addressing needs and risks and evidence of reflection in supervision.
- 8.2. Additional auditing work has taken place on the quality of PLO, GP contribution to Child Protection Conferences, CIN plans and repeat CIN episodes. The areas to further strengthen include in plans; being more specific and timeframes communication with parents should be timely and in a manner that enables their understanding and assessments could be more analytical and impactful.

## **9. Ofsted and Outstanding Board and Plan**

- 9.1. Following our inspection and Good rating we have developed an Outstanding board. This will be chaired by the Chief Executive. The board will meet quarterly and cover both Children Social Care and Education.

## **10. Sufficiency project**

- 10.1. The Council has secured £1.4 million over 2023/24 and 2024/25 from the Staying Close fund, in part to support staffing and running costs over those two years. The bid was largely centred around the existing Council commitment to develop the Millersdale scheme. Quarterly performance reports to demonstrate progress will be submitted to the Department for Education (the funding body).
- 10.2. Torus has estimated the refurbishment cost at £430,000 (May 2023) this cost has already been agreed by SAGE, and an annual rental, payable by the Council of £27,500. The rental cost will be funded from the Staying Close grant for the grant funding period and from Year 3 onwards, the annual cost of the lease will be met from efficiencies within the cost of leaving care provision and the avoidance of commissioning out of borough places for up to six care leavers.
- 10.3. The average cost of a leaving care placement is currently £77k, avoiding six out of Borough placements could realise a saving of £462,000 per year.
- 10.4. The council has now signed and agreed to proceed with Millersdale. Plans are now progressing at pace to secure staff and wider support staff as per the Staying Close requirements.
- 10.5. The Grove, our internal children's home has recently been subject to the procurement process to explore whether any external providers wished to run the home. There was little suitable interest due to the original cost analysis being low, so the home has been placed on the chest again at a higher price. We will monitor interest and if this is not looking viable our contingency plan is to take necessary actions at pace to run the homes ourselves.
- 10.6. Fisher German has been commissioned to look at purchasing additional properties, this is in line with the Cabinet paper on the funding of our own homes. Further updates will follow in due course to advise on progress.

## **11. Attendance**

- 11.1. In keeping with the DFE guidance: Working together to improve school attendance, teams across the Education and Learning services have continued to work collaboratively with schools to ensure attendance remains a priority area.
- 11.2. Extensive training has been delivered to teams across children's services to highlight that attendance is everyone's responsibility and to ensure that a collective effort is made to improve overall attendance and reduce persistent absenteeism.
- 11.3. A spotlight review has been conducted which afforded the opportunity to share good practice and identify solutions for areas of concern. Where appropriate, some schools have received intensive support to address attendance issues, e.g., frequent meetings to discuss strategies and analyse data trends.
- 11.4. Achievement and Improvement meetings have focused on school attendance and the analysis of data relating to vulnerable groups such as pupils entitled to free school meals, pupils with identified SEND and children with a social worker. Locality cluster meetings are operational as are various interventions and projects aimed at improving overall attendance such as the attendance quality mark for all secondary schools.

- 11.5. Innovative practice, involving the use of social prescribing and use of outreach workers, is beginning to show impact and plans to build on this are already in motion, e.g. use of external support through Maximum Edge. Feedback from headteachers illustrates the need for a current arrangement to be reviewed: reducing the period of absence before fixed penalty notice from 10 to 5 - this is now under review.

## **12. Schools**

- 12.1. Since the start of the new academic year, schools have been invited to take part in a wide range of training events / briefing sessions led by local authority officers, consultants and external partners.
- 12.2. All headteachers were invited to join an information sharing session early in September to receive updates linked to attendance, TESSA, inspections, SEND and general service updates across education and learning.
- 12.3. On 26<sup>th</sup> September, all headteachers and chairs of governors were invited to a briefing session delivered by Rachel Goodwin and Pippa Maitland-Jackson (Senior HMIs for Schools / SEND). School leaders were provided with information about updates to Ofsted's inspection handbook, were given a detailed account of how SEND Local Area Inspections are conducted and were invited to take part in a generic Q&A session at the end of the morning.
- 12.4. Members of the Learning Partnership met for a collaborative event on 10<sup>th</sup> October to explore five key development areas: VIBE report - young people's feedback, TESSA, Early Help, Transition and Alternative Provision. The work / findings from these groups were shared with school governors during the termly governor forum which took place on 26<sup>th</sup> October.
- 12.5. In addition to these large-scale events, schools have continued to receive support appropriate to their need, e.g., Band B reviews and Achievement and Improvement meetings have been conducted across all secondary schools and selected primary schools. Support has also been given to the SACRE group, ECTs (Early Career Teachers) and plans are underway for this year's moderation and monitoring duties. Officers from Education and Learning met with Ofsted NW's regional leader at the start of November to discuss schools' performance, attendance, recent inspections and the LA's offer of support / challenge to schools.

## **13. SEND**

- 13.1. The SEND Partnership Board is in the process of reviewing the current SEND Strategy 2021-24 A Life of Equal Chances in preparation for the production of the new Strategy for next year. Preparation for this includes an evaluation of our current position, a shared understanding of children's experiences and impact and consideration of key priorities for the coming year.
- 13.2. 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.
- 13.3. The team has now moved to 'Module 2' of the programme, which will engage with the wider SEND partnership through a series of case studies, deep dives and listening forums which will be used to inform the final grant application, which is due for submission mid-December.
- 13.4. The new joint St Helens/Halton Free School, The Raise Academy, is now finally under construction with an anticipated opening date of September 2024. The new school will cater for pupils 11-16 with social, emotional and/or mental health (SEMH) needs and will complement existing provision in Willow Bank and the new primary SEMH resourced provision at Ashurst Primary School.

- 13.5. The volume of EHCPs produced by the SEND team has continued to increase as the additional capacity has taken effect, with a complement of 10 caseworkers and 1651 EHCPs maintained by the Local Authority.
- 13.6. The number of new EHCPs issued this year is now the highest that has been achieved since the implementation of the reforms in 2014. While the 20-week indicator has improved, the poor start to the year coupled with a slight plateau in performance due to the impact of the cyber incident and the gaps in Educational Psychology staffing, means that this remains a significant challenge for the Local Authority.
- 13.7. It is likely that St Helens will be one of the lowest performing local authorities nationally for 2023. Levels of parental satisfaction also appear to be returning; 84% of parents who returned their EHCP survey in 2023 agreed that they were fully involved in the assessment process, and 86% agreed the local authority listened to their views.
- 13.8. SEND partners across the local area continue to prepare for the new local area SEND inspection, which is expected imminently. SEND partners across the local area continue to prepare for the new local area SEND inspection, which is anticipated early in 2024.

#### **14. Consideration of alternatives**

- 14.1. N/A

#### **15. Conclusion**

- 15.1. This has been a challenging time for children services, high demand and high costs placements along with challenges recruiting social work staff has caused additional pressures of Children social care.
- 15.2. Education continues with issues around managing attendance. However, our recent Ofsted conversation has stated that we are in advance of other areas in our work to address this.
- 15.3. The SEND inspection is imminent, so work is also underway to jointly work across children service and health to improve the lives of children with SEND.
- 15.4. Following our Ofsted inspection outcome and the fact we are now longer inadequate, I will discuss with the chair as to whether this report is still needed going forward.

#### **16. Legal Implications**

- 16.1. N/A

#### **17. Equality Impact Assessment**

- 17.1. N/A

#### **18. Social Value**

- 18.1 N/A

#### **19. Net Zero and Environment**

- 19.1. N/A

#### **20. Health and Wellbeing**

- 20.1. N/A

## **21. Customer and Resident**

21.1. 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.

## **22. Asset and Property**

22.1. N/A

## **24. Staffing and Human Resources**

24.1. 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.

## **25. Risks**

25.1 N/A

## **26. Finance**

26.1 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.

## **27. Policy Framework Implications**

27.1. N/A

## **28. Impact and Opportunities on Localities**

28.1. N/A

## **29. Background Documents**

29.1. N/A

## **30. Appendices**

30.1. N/A