

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of this Committee held on
8 January 2024

(Present) **Councillor T Long (Chair)**
Councillors CD Banks, Maguire, Murphy MBE, Osundeko and Sweeney

(Not Present) **Councillors Greaves, McCormack, Sims, and van der Burg**

Mr C Williams (Roman Catholic Church Representative)
Mr D Thorpe (Church of England Representative)
Miss A Kirman (Parent Governor – Primary)

20 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Greaves, McCormack, Sims, van der Burg and Mr Thorpe.

21 MINUTES

* **Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2023, be approved and signed.**

22 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No Declarations of Interest from Members were made.

23 DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIP

No Declarations of party whip were made.

24 DIRECTORS REPORT ON PROGRESS IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES

A report was presented by the Director of Children and Young People Services, which provided an overview and update of progress in Children's Services.

Work continued during this period with improvements across the service following the Ofsted ILAC inspection in July 2023, with a focus around the key main areas, sufficiency, demand strategy, family support and in education, attendance, TESSA and SEND.

It was reported that since then, placements and sufficiency had 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 had changed over recent years with the majority of homes being run by private companies. The market faced significant challenges relating to poor quality, high costs, and poor outcomes. In addition, the high reliance on the private sector for provision was driving up the costs of care significantly without commensurate rises in the quality of care.

Members acknowledged that this was reflected in local authorities across the Liverpool City Region (LCR) and indeed across the country, whereby expenditure on children's

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social care had grown by 41% compared to a decade earlier, even though the children's population had grown by less than 10% over the same period.

In conclusion, it was reported that this has been a challenging time for children services, high demand, and high costs placements along with challenges recruiting social work staff had caused additional pressures of Children social care.

The report also updated Members on:

- Children's Data,
- Fostering,
- Workforce,
- Quality of Practice,
- Ofsted and Outstanding Board and Plan,
- Sufficiency project,
- Attendance,
- Schools, and
- SEND.

The Director of Children and Young People Services was thanked for the thorough and comprehensive report.

Comments and questions were raised as follows:

- In response to comments to a question on the impact of staff morale due to increasing caseloads, it was confirmed that the service demands were challenging, partially as caseloads were rising once again. Currently, seven staff members had now reached a case load of 20. Given the increasing demand, it was reported that staff morale across the service was good. Staff engagement, such as meetings, communication streams with staff, was well received. A recent staff survey provided positive feedback particularly around communication. Along with this, Senior staff 'walked the floor', and ensure communication streams were functioning to support staff. Irrespective of the challenges, it was reported that the quality of practice was being maintained.
- It was also reported that work had been carried out with the Cheshire and Merseyside partnership which was the affiliation with university students. It was noted that St Helens Council was the host authority which generated some funding, more importantly, allowed a presence and influence which had some positive impact in terms of attracting newly qualified staff. It was further acknowledged that through this work stream, St Helens Council had been recognised, via the partnership, as a good place to work and start a career in Social Work and Childrens Services.
- Procurement concerns were raised on the planned outsourcing model for managing Children's homes and why residential homes could not be in-sourced. It was reported that one of the key issues of running a residential children's home was staffing, particularly recruitment and sourcing registered managers in what was a specialist area. It was noted that on balance recruiting a specialist organisation in the field of running a residential home was currently the preferred option whilst the Council would maintain over-all control and oversight including the terms and conditions, as well as overseeing contracts.
- Further comments were made around considerations on a shared approach for children's homes across the region.

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- Educational psychologists continued to be significantly challenging to recruit. It was reported that the current team was strong and supported by an assistant psychologist as well as associate psychologists who were working successfully on Educational, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) work. It was highlighted that the Council was under resourced with vacancies in educational psychology and the pressures of increasing request for EHCPs month on month were proving challenging.
- Members requested reassurance on how carers and parents were being kept up to date on the progress of EHCPs given the backlog of requests. Officers explained a case management plan ensured parents and carers were kept up to date however, some cases had resulted in complaints. It was noted that communication was a key priority for the service. To improve communication access for parents and carers, it was reported that a helpline to support parents'/ carers was being considered and an update would be provided to members on the progress of the helpline being implemented.
- Members requested information on the forward planning of recruitment to the post of Director of Children and Young People Services following the announcement by the Director that they would retire in June 2024. Reassurance that the priorities and model for continued progress that had proven successful would be maintained. The recruitment time frames were explained, with the potential of a long hand over period that would support the ongoing progress plan for Children's Services.
- In response to questions around social worker assistants and non-qualified staff, it was reaffirmed that social worker assistants did not currently case hold. It was reported that as part of the governmental change's initiative and reform of the practice, the authority would be looking at how the potential reform could be applied.
- Comments were made around the SEND Community and how ambitious the Council was in developing the SEND strategy. It was reported that the SEND strategy work would be commencing in February 2024 and that enhancing the SEND community, ambitions and inclusion was the priority for that piece of work and throughout all the council's priorities.
- Recruitment of School governors was raised as a concern, members expressed concerns around the increased expectations of school governors and the increasing demand on them given they were volunteers. Officers acknowledged the work carried out by school governors and the current number of vacant positions. Work however was being carried out to look at options to recruit school governors.

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Resolved that:

- (1) the progress achieved to date be noted.**
- (2) an update be provided on the progress of the recruitment of residential children's home providers; and**
- (3) the committee to receive an update on the implementation of the EHCP helpline for parents and carers.**

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25 QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE REPORT 2023/24

A report was submitted which provided an analysis of progress and performance over the period from 1 July to 30 September 2023 against the Council's priority 1 "Ensure children and young people have a positive start in life".

The report reflected the new performance framework and targets aligned to the priorities and outcomes of the Borough Strategy as agreed by Cabinet on 26 April 2023. This framework provided the basis for quarterly performance reporting to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny over the course of 2023-24.

The Quarter 2 Performance Report 2023-24 reflected performance and the legacy impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, rising demand for services and a requirement to deliver significant budget savings. As a result, it was more critical than ever that the Council had a clear understanding of what it needed to measure and how it was performing to inform effective decision making. The indicators reported were split between Tier 1 and Tier 2:

Tier 1 – A set of high-level strategic indicators and targets that constituted the Outcomes Framework of the Borough Strategy 2021-2030.

Tier 2 – A set of performance indicators and targets to address key priority areas of performance within Directorates / Departments linked to the business planning process and the Borough Strategy 2021-2030.

Annual targets were set where possible within the context of national, Northwest, and local authority comparator group data. Targets equally aspired to be challenging but achievable within the context of the available resources. The targets also took account of performance during 2022-23 and the legacy impact of the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, rising service demand and a challenging financial position for local government.

There were 87 performance indicators, where Quarter 2 performance against target was available to be reported. Of these:

- 74% of indicator targets had been either exceeded, met fully, or met within 95% of target. This compared to 75% of indicators at Quarter 2 2022-23. (NB percentages rounded to nearest whole number).
- 26% of indicator targets were not met, compared to 25% in Quarter 2 2022-23.
- The trend measure indicated over the course of the last 12 months 47% of indicators showed improvement, 15% of indicators maintained the same performance and 38% of indicators showed a downward. The position in Quarter 2 2022-23 was that 56% of indicators showed improvement, 5% of indicators maintained the same performance and 39% of indicators showed a downward trajectory.
- 18% of all indicators where comparison is possible are in the top quartile, compared to 39% at Quarter 2 2021-22, whilst 29% are in the bottom quartile, compared to 33% at Quarter 2 2022-23. 23% and 29% of indicators are in the 2nd and 3rd quartile respectively, compared to 10% and 18% in Quarter 2 2022-23 (NB percentages rounded to nearest whole number)

In summary, at Quarter 2 2023-24 there were a number of outcome areas which demonstrated strong and / or improving performance. Equally there were areas where performance against outcomes was either some distance from target or an outlier in terms of St Helens performance relative to the England average or our statistical neighbours.

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These areas included three outcomes within Priority 1 – ‘Ensure children and young people have a positive start in life’

- The children’s social care outcome: This included rates of Children in Need and Children Looked After, where current performance was statistically significantly higher than last published England averages and that of the Council’s nearest neighbours. The number of early help episodes that had been closed and had subsequently not gone on to have a social care intervention in the following 12 months as a percentage of total closures was also some way from target at Quarter 2.
- The children’s aspiration and attainment outcome: This included the timeliness of EHCP completions and the percentage of young people NEET.
- The children’s health and resilience outcome: This included the number of teenage conceptions for which St Helens had the seventh highest rate in England. Under-18 hospital admissions for alcohol, breastfeeding rates were statistically significantly worse than last published England averages and the performance of the nearest neighbours. The MMR vaccination take up for 5-year-olds was also below target.

Comments and main points were raised in relation to Priority 1 Performance Indicators as follows:

- Information was provided on the Early Help Assessment Tool (EHAT) and the review being undertaken to support and make EHAT more user friendly for partners. Members agreed this was a positive step towards improving early intervention. Members requested that feedback be provided to the committee on partners responses to the updated Early Help Assessment Tool document.
- Further discussion was provided on the process followed in developing the new document. Members were reassured that work had been undertaken to ensure and mirror best practice into the Council’s revised EHAT document.
- In relation to indicator E&S 005, Members requested information on the strategies to re-engage young people back into work, education, or training. Officers acknowledged the increase in the figures. It was reported that many of the funded programmes had now ended, and resource was limited. The scale of opportunity had been reduced for engagement programmes and this had a negative impact on the numbers. It was reported that a significant amount of work had been done and real time figures were showing an improvement.
- Members questioned indicator PH005 – and what was being done to improve the figure shown in the report. It was reported there had been a disruption in wellbeing service since covid. Maternal pathways had been disrupted and staff turnover had increased leading to vacancies. However, it was noted that the new breast-feeding strategy along with the ‘Child Friendly Borough’ initiative were being developed and that progress and engagement with partners and colleagues was ongoing.
- Information was provided on the neglect awareness strategy.

* **Resolved that:**

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- (1) the performance position at Quarter 2 2023-24 be noted; and
- (2) an update be provided to the committee on the progress of the 'Child Friendly Borough' initiative.

26 BRIGHT SPOTS SURVEY PRESENTATION

A presentation was delivered by the CYPS Consultation and Review Officer which informed Members of a research project by Coram Voice that aimed to understand what was important to Children in Care and Care Leavers.

The Bright Spots Survey took place between November 2022 – March 2023 with 119 Children aged 4-17 taking part, 32% of cohort. 35% aged 4-7 (26), 34% aged 8-11 (19), 31% aged 11-17 (74).

The presentation informed Members of the strengths action plan and next steps.

The presentation covered:

- The Bright Spots action plan
- Areas identified for development
- Additional actions
- VIBE/Reach consultation

It was reported that the programme was a research project by Coram Voice with the aim being to understand what was important to children in care and care leavers and to share actions and learning from the feedback. It measured subjective well-being through the voice of the child.

Comments and main points were raised are as follow:

- Members commended the work undertaken to ensure the voice of the child was heard and that officers had acted to shape both the Council's and partner services.
- Members requested that further detail be brought to the Committee on the figures stated in the presentation – "74% of 11-17 year olds stated that they like school or college 'a lot' or 'a bit'. Members wanted to understand more about the 26% of 11–17-year-olds who do not enjoy school, and a breakdown of the figures of those who only like school 'a bit', which schools these figures related to, and how this was being actioned to improve.
- Members discussed new guidance provided to social workers in November 2023 about ensuring that children have the information available to them so they can access their respective social worker for a 1-1 discussion. Members expressed the importance of enabling a child in care to raise issues or concerns they may have in relation to their care placement.

Further comments were made on:

- trauma informed Schools and training,
- Social worker retention, and
- Pen portraits.

* **Resolved that:**

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- (1) the presentation be noted;
- (2) the committee to receive feedback following the audit in Children's Services on the progress of the new guidance issued in November 2023 in relation to 'children in care having the knowledge that they can request a 1-1 meeting with their social worker'; and
- (3) the committee to receive details in relation to:
 - 26% of 11–17-year-olds who do not enjoy school,
 - A breakdown of the figures of those who only like school 'a bit',
 - which schools these figures related to, and
 - provide context and an action plan for improvement.

27 CABINET RESPONSE TO THE SPOTLIGHT REVIEW OF ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE IN PREGNANCY – COLLECTIVE ACTION TO REDUCE RISK AND HARM TO CHILDREN

A report was provided which updated Members with the Action Plan response to the recommendations of the Alcohol and Drug use in Pregnancy – Collective action to reduce Risk and Harm to Children Task Group, which had been agreed by this Committee.

At the Work Programme Workshop held on 6 July 2022, Members suggested a study group to establish further understanding on the issue of alcohol and substance misuse in pregnancy and the subsequent problems this may cause

The Action Plan set out the Cabinet response to the recommendations from the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee Task Group.

- * **Resolved that the Action Plan setting out the recommendations from the Alcohol and Drug use in Pregnancy – Collective action to reduce Risk and Harm to Children Task Group be noted.**

28 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Work Programme was attached to the agenda for consideration by Members. The Chair provided an overview of the Committee's work programme and the items planned for the agenda of the next meeting.

- * **Resolved that the work programme be agreed.**