

# Public Document Pack

## Southend-on-Sea City Council

### Strategy, Change & Governance

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22 November 2022

Dear Councillor

### PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - TUESDAY, 29TH NOVEMBER, 2022

Please find enclosed, for consideration at the next meeting of the People Scrutiny Committee taking place on Tuesday, 29th November, 2022, the following report(s) that were unavailable when the agenda was printed.

#### Agenda No    Item

8.        **Children's Services Improvement Board (Pages 1 - 22)**

**Stephen Tautz**

Principal Democratic Services Officer

Democratic Services

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# Southend-on-Sea City Council

Report of Executive Director (Children & Public Health)  
to

People Scrutiny Committee

on

29<sup>th</sup> November 2022

Report prepared by: Michael Marks, Executive Director  
Children and Public Health

Agenda  
Item No.

8

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## Update on the Children's Social Work, Early Help and Youth Support Service improvement programme

Relevant Scrutiny People Scrutiny Committee  
Cabinet Member: Councillor Laurie Burton  
Part 1 (Public Agenda Item)

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### 1. Purpose of Report

To update the People's Scrutiny Committee on the work of the Children's Services Improvement Board.

To receive a presentation on the findings of a 'deep dive' exercise undertaken by the new independent Chair of the Children's Services Improvement Board

### 2. Recommendations

People Scrutiny is asked to:-

2.1 Note the developments and update since the last report to people Scrutiny from the Children's Services Improvement Board captured in this report

2.2 Note the findings from the 'deep dive' exercise undertaken by the new independent chair of the Children's Services Improvement Board captured in appendix 1.

### 3. Background

3.1 The Children's Services Improvement Board is in place to provide strategic challenge and oversight to enable the service to improve following two consecutive Ofsted judgements of Requires Improvement in July 2016 and 2019. an Ofsted Inspection of the service in 2019 that judged the Service to be Requires Improvement. This followed an Ofsted Inspection in 2016 that also judged the Service to Requires Improvement.

3.2 The Improvement Board was established in 2016 to support the improvement of the Service to good or better. It scrutinises the progress of the service against a set of priorities and milestones captured in an Improvement Plan. The current Improvement Plan is being reviewed and revised and will be shared with the

Improvement Board, seeking the Board's endorsement once that review is completed.

3.3 The Improvement Board meets bimonthly, and the membership is as follows:

- Independent Chair
- Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children and Learning
- Opposition Portfolio Holder for Children and Learning
- Chief Executive of the Council
- Independent Safeguarding Adviser to the Southend Strategic Safeguarding Partnership
- Two front line practitioners from Children's Services
- Executive Director, Children and Public Health

3.4 The Director of Children's Services and her leadership team attend the Improvement Board.

3.5 Since the last update to People Scrutiny some of the key developments include:-

- Appointing a new Director for Children's Social Work, Early Help and Youth Support Service
- Introducing additional independent challenge scrutiny appointing in conjunction with the department of Education (DfE) an Independent Chair to the Board following a review (March 2022) of the impact and effectiveness of the Board. The new Chair of the Board is presenting (appendix 1) his findings on the service, following a deep dive exercise undertaken in August and September 2022.
- Securing independent challenge and support for the Children's service improvement programme from a London Borough via the DfE's Sector Led Improvement Programme (SLIP). The SLIP started working with us in the Autumn 2022.
- Embedding the new quality assurance case file audit system that was piloted from July 2021, improving audit compliance to 90% or more each quarter
- Improving practice as part of the Public Law Outline in advance of any care proceedings.
- Held the Council's first Foster Carers celebration event for at least 3 years on Friday 25<sup>th</sup> November 2022, recognising and thanking the Foster carers for their service and support to some of the most vulnerable children and young people in Southend.
- Reducing the number of children the Council cares for (as at the time of submitting the report 304, an overall reduction of 14 this year) although the number remains above the national average.
- Increased the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children receiving support from the Council in line with the Government's National Transfer scheme
- Improving engagement with staff through weekly Keep in Touch (KiT) meetings and holding the first staff conference for all staff since 2016.
- Introducing a new recruitment and retention model for some Social Worker posts in hard to recruit to teams moving to a model that provides a larger

award for staff after 3 years of service replacing the annual payments in the previous model.

- Introduction of Practice and Performance Board that has driven compliance and better outcomes for children including:
  - Focussing on staff supervision Improving compliance to 95% the number of staff that receive monthly supervision.
  - Children on a child protection visited in 10 working days has improved from 81.5% to 99%.
  - Increased numbers of children having their child protection plans reviewed by the core group to 72% however is still an area of focus.
  - There has been a positive reduction of the number of children made subject to a child protection.
  - Social worker caseload average is 16 reduced from 22 in quarter 1 of 2022/23.
  - Social worker vacancy rate has drop decreased from 12 to 2 however we are still reliant on high numbers of agency.

3.6 There is still much work to do and a focus over the next 3 to 6 months will include:

- Improving the engagement with foster carers through a new Fostering offer, agreed by Cabinet in November 2022, to improve recruitment and retention so that more children can be placed in Southend, improving outcomes, and reducing the reliance on expensive independent fostering agencies.
- Improving opportunities for our care experienced young adults so more of them are in employment, education, and training.
- Engage with partners to review our threshold document to ensure we are providing early help and statutory services to the right families and children at the right time.
- Develop the family group conference offer to support family resilience and reduce the need for children to come into care.
- Continue to focus on direct work with children so assessment and planning has a greater focus on the lived experience of children.
- Implement the sufficiency strategy for 2023.

3.7 Since the last update to the People Scrutiny the service has been subject an Ofsted Focussed Visit on 'the local authority's arrangements for matching, placements, and decision-making for children in care, the experience and progress of disabled children in care and the progress of children living in unregulated or unregistered provision. The report from that Focussed Visit is attached as a background paper to this report.

3.7 Progress on improving matching and achieving permanency continues to be a priority focus area. We still need to strengthen timeliness of children in our care being matched with their permanent carers including plans for reunification.

#### **4. Other Options**

There are none related to this report

#### **5. Reasons for Recommendations**

To update Members of the People Scrutiny on the work of the Improvement Board and the wider improvement programme for Children's services and to clarify the updating arrangements with People's Scrutiny.

## **6. Corporate Implications**

### **6.1 Contribution to the Southend 2050 Road Map.**

The Council is a Corporate Parent for all children and young people who are under the care of the Local Authority. In addition to LAC, Children's Services works with some of the most vulnerable Children and young people and their families. Supporting children to good or better outcomes means that this work contributes to all five of the 2050 outcomes.

### **6.2 Financial Implications**

The Children's Social Work, Early Help and Youth Support Service is currently projecting as reported at period 6 an overspend of circa £6.5m, which is mainly due to pressure with the cost of external placements and staffing budgets requiring agency cover for key and critical posts. Children's services continues to work to mitigate this spend pressure where possible and safe for the child. Overall financial stability of the children service provision remains a key corporate and service priority.

### **6.3 Legal Implications**

The Council holds a number of statutory duties for children and young people including those that are Children Looked After (Children we care for), care leavers (Care Experienced) and those deemed to be Children in Need (CiN) under current legislation including the Children Act.

### **6.4 People Implications**

There are none related to this report.

### **6.5 Property Implications**

There are none related to this report.

### **6.6 Consultation**

N/A

### **6.7 Equalities and Diversity Implications**

There are none related to this report.

### **6.8 Risk Assessment**

N/A

### **6.9 Value for Money**

N/A

6.10 Community Safety Implications

N/A

6.11 Environmental Impact

N/A

**7. Background Papers**

**Ofsted inspection of Services for Children in Need of help and Protection, Children Looked After and Care Leavers report July 2016** [Southend on Sea draft report \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](#)

**Children's Services Focussed Visit report May 2022** [50182671 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](#)

**8. Appendices**

**Children's Deep Dive Summary presentation – Lou Williams Independent Chair of the Children's Services Improvement Board**

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# Southend Children's Services: Deep-Dive Summary

Presentation to People Scrutiny: 29<sup>th</sup> November 2022

Lou Williams: Independent Improvement Adviser



# Introduction & background...

- I have been working in Southend since July 2022;
- I am chairing the Improvement Board, which is re-focused to consider children's social care & early help, and not SEND;
- My background includes being Director of Children's Services in Peterborough and Cambridgeshire until March 2022;
- In order to better understand Children's Services in Southend, I undertook a 'deep dive' between August & September 2022;
- I reviewed key policies and procedures, analysed key performance data and spoke with staff, managers, partner agencies, foster carers and parents;
- This is a summary of findings.



## Overarching summary...

- Staff and managers in the service are passionate and committed;
- They broadly welcome the change in focus in children's services and recent changes of leadership;
- They want clarity about processes and procedures;
- There is some very good work with children, young people & families;
- But plans for some children have been in place for too long, and not all children are in the right part of the overall system;
- The practice model is yet to be fully embedded;
- Change is happening at pace, but this is still quite recent.

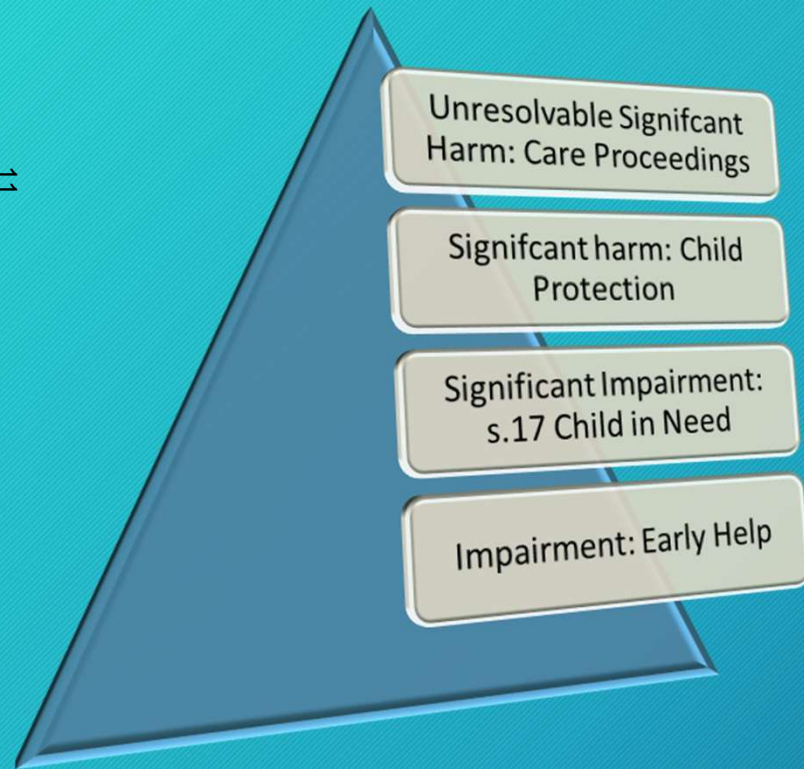


# Key legislation & the Southend practice model...

- The key legislation governing children's services is the Children Act 1989;
- The Act established the principles
  - That services must work together to support children to remain with their families where ever possible;
  - And of 'Significant harm', 'significant impairment', 'partnership working' and the need to give due consideration to the child's wishes and feelings;
- Restorative practice is in line with these principles by emphasising working with parents, not doing to, and by motivating parents to want to address issues, as opposed to threatening consequences for not complying;
- 'Early Help' was introduced by the 2004 Children Act. This Act requires local authorities to coordinate - not to provide - services that improve outcomes for children and young people.



# Achieving best outcomes for children...



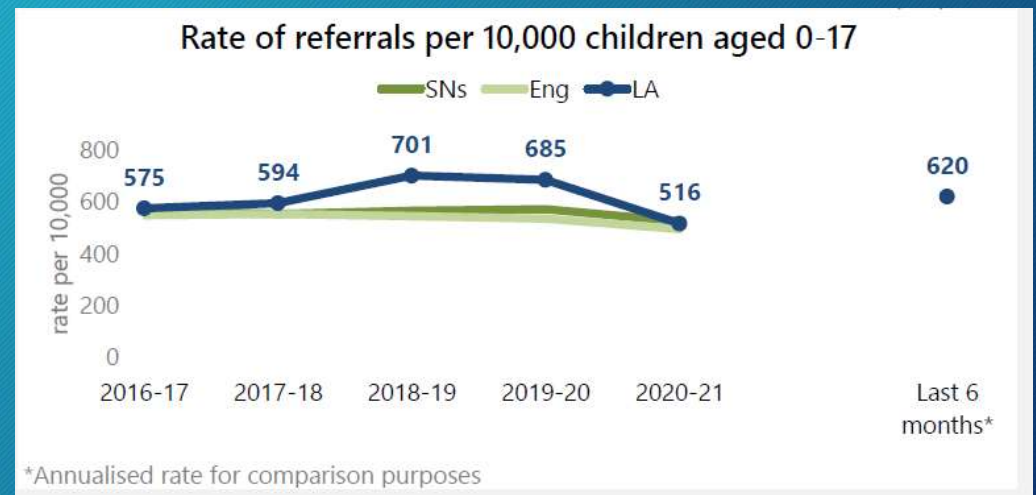
- The legislative threshold for children's social care is very high;
- Families can decline services at s.17;
- The best outcomes are usually achieved by those who know families well offering support and access to services, not referring them on;
- But this can lead to challenges for practitioners working with children and families.



# Early help in Southend...

- There is a great deal of good practice, with many schools and others working hard to coordinate support plans for families;
- But this is not a consistent picture, and referral rates to children's social care are much higher than similar areas;
- Referrals are often made without consent;
- The threshold document needs to be refreshed with partners [schools, health, police, voluntary sector etc. in line with:
  - the principles of restorative practice;
  - What we know about achieving best outcomes;
  - The legislation and guidance.

- Referrals per 10,000: Oct 2022:





# Children in need & in need of protection...

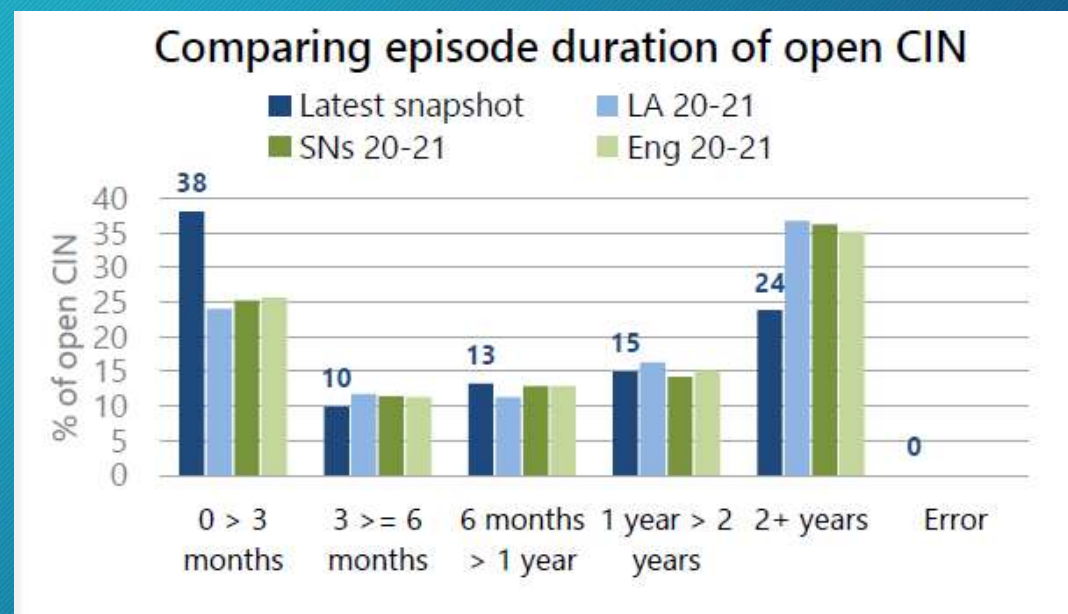
- Achieving best outcomes for these very vulnerable children depends on:
  - Manageable case-loads [which is why the early help offer is so critical];
  - SMART plans that are developed in partnership with families & reviewed regularly;
  - Purposeful visiting by social workers and other practitioners to children & families;
  - Good supervision and management oversight to ensure that plans do not drift;
  - Good partnership working with schools, health, police, the voluntary sector and so on;
  - Regular auditing of case files to assure good practice;
  - Training and support to managers & practitioners.



# Children in need...

- The data shows that action is being taken to review the length of time children remain subject to child in need plans;
- Performance in Southend is improving as illustrated by the proportion with plans for more than two years;
- Plans of this length indicate drift & delay for children and also result in higher caseloads;
- The high proportion of plans for 0-3 months reflects continuing pressure of referral numbers at the front door - again emphasising the need to develop the early help response.

- Length of plans: October 2022:

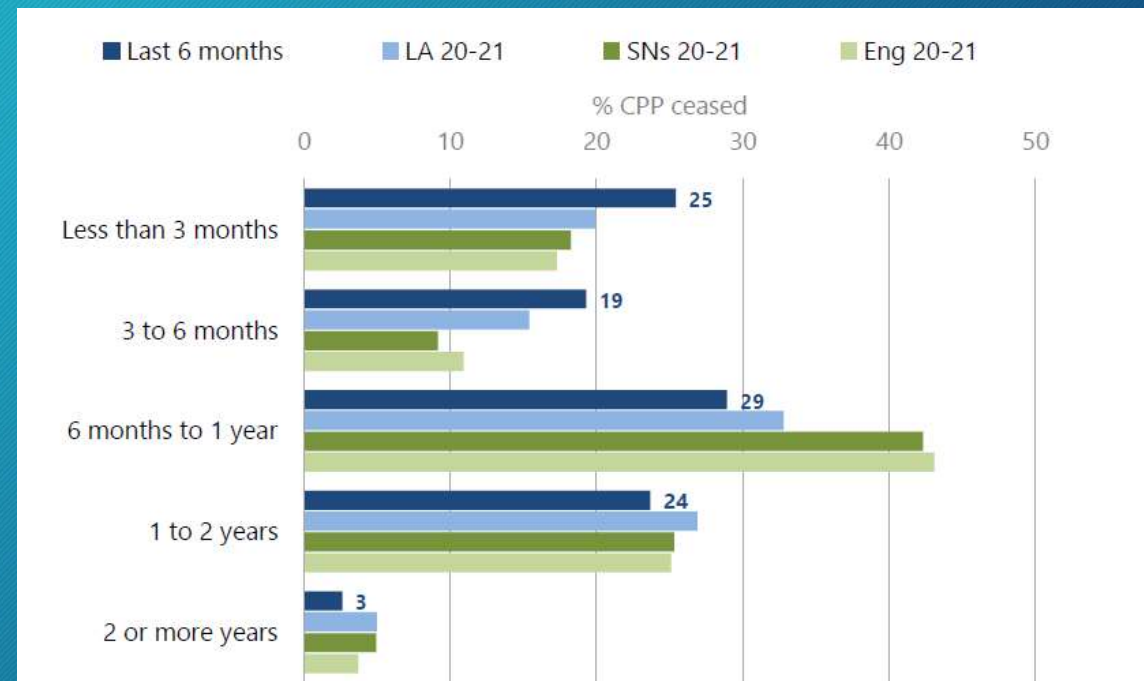




# Children in need of protection...

- Fewer children subject to child protection plans for long periods;
- 98% of children visited according to statutory time frames - very good;
- Relatively high proportion of plans ending early suggests possible threshold issues, although small overall numbers [116] can produce big swings;
- Overall numbers of children subject to child protection plans are now below statistical neighbour rates.

- Duration of CP plans ending October 2022:



# Children in care...

- Overall rate of children in care at 75 per 10,000 above S/N rate of 69;
- Care numbers have been declining over recent months, however;
- Some children affected by changes in social worker;
- Placement sufficiency is a challenge, with relatively high proportions of Southend children placed outside of the City;
- Recent proposals relating to fees and allowances for foster carers should help this, but impact needs to be reviewed;
- Foster carers are highly committed to Southend;
- Some very good support to carers but training & supervision offer could be improved further;
- Foster carers are not always included in team decision making for children;
- Support to develop a fostering community is very positive.



# Children in care & care leavers...

- Action is being taken to improve:
  - Pre-proceedings;
  - Permanency planning for children.
- Data on those leaving care indicates more attention is needed on supporting children return home to families where in their long term interests;
- It is not yet common culture to review and renew assessments for children in care at least annually;
- The virtual school is a strength;
- Data relating to care leavers aged 18-21 is positive in terms of suitable accommodation, 'staying put' and remaining in touch indicates good performance, with EET performance better than statistical neighbours.



# Quality of practice & management oversight...

- Practitioners & managers talked about previous lack of clarity about expectations;
- Acknowledged positive changes in this area, however, and this was less of a theme in later interviews;
- Supervision is taking place much more regularly, with compliance above 90%;
- Practitioners and managers have welcomed practice workshops by senior leaders;
- Launch of practice standards and on-line procedures will support greater consistency;
- A review of audit capacity is recommended to ensure leaders have a clear view of consistency of practice.



# Workforce...

- There is a national shortage of qualified & experienced social workers and team managers;
- Social workers want to come to places where they can make a difference by supporting children to remain at home
- Social workers tend to stay where they have good training and development opportunities, manageable case-loads & good support;
- Southend has real opportunities to develop powerful a narrative through re-launching the restorative practice model;
- Unitary authorities provide a smaller, more nurturing environment, which also needs to be part of that narrative.



# Leadership & sustainability...

- Leaders in Southend are increasingly visible and practitioners and managers were expressing greater trust in the change process in later interviews;
- The sector-led improvement focus on managers and leadership is positive;
- Effecting the changes needed in the broader partnership also needs capacity, however;
- Re-focusing an element of current direct early help delivery to capacity building and partnership development should be considered;
- Services that are delivering consistently are also cost-effective, but savings do not flow immediately.



## Concluding remarks....

- There is real passion among practitioners, managers & carers to support the best outcomes for children and young people in Southend;
- Leaders have a good understanding of strengths and areas for development;
- Priority areas for continued focus include:
  - Workforce - recruitment, training and development;
  - Embedding restorative practice and ensuring impact on outcomes;
  - Thresholds across the system;
  - Placement sufficiency for children in care;
- The foundations for a good service are clearly evident;
- Leaders are delivering improvements at pace.

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