

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Agenda
Item No.

Report of Executive Director (Children and Public Health)

to

People Scrutiny

on

5th October 2021

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

Update on Children's Services Improvement Programme from the Children's Services Improvement Board

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

1. Purpose of Report

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

To agree the frequency of updates to the People Scrutiny Committee from the Children's Services Improvement Board.

2. Recommendations

2.1 The People Scrutiny Committee is asked to: -

- Note the background and current work programme of the Children's Services Improvement Board captured in Appendix One and summarised in section 3 of the report.
- Agree to receiving further updates on the work of the Children's Services Improvement Board every 6 months.

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 2 consecutive Ofsted judgements of Requires Improvement in July 2016 and 2019.

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 the Improvement Plan (appendix 1).

3.3 The Improvement Board has been strengthened in the last 12 – 18 months. For example, the structure and content of the Improvement Plan was revised in

2020 to make it sharper and more focused with 6 key priorities (para 3.7). The 6 priorities are informed by the annual self-assessment that the service undertakes and feedback from the most recent Ofsted inspection report in 2019. In addition, 2 frontline practitioners from Children's Services have been added to the Improvement Board to ensure that as part of the oversight and strategic scrutiny of the improvement programme, there is a practitioner perspective fed into the Board and back to the Senior leadership management team within Children's Services.

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

- Leader of the Council (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
- Independent
- Two front line practitioners from Children's Services
- Executive Director, Children and Public Health
- Director of Children's Services (Chair of Children's services management team)
- Director of Education and Early Years

3.5 The Children's Services management team attend the Improvement Board.

3.6 The Children's Service's Improvement Plan (Appendix 1) sets out the 6 priorities and the actions and outcomes under those priorities to improve the service and in turn provide good or better outcomes for the children and young people it works with.

3.7 The 6 priorities are: -

1. That leadership will drive our ambition and purpose throughout organisation
2. To improve the quality of practice so it is consistently better
3. To improve the outcomes for Looked After Children
4. To deliver the right service at the right time
5. To impose financial effectiveness and sustainability within children's services
6. To work with children, young people and families to shape services

3.8 Some achievements and progress against the 6 priorities in the first 6 months of this financial year include:

Leadership

- A 'Vision for Children's Services' has been developed by staff with input from the Children in Care Council and Southend Youth Council and was launched in September 2021.
- The Corporate Parenting Strategy has been reviewed and revised and was signed off by the Corporate Parenting Group in September 2021. It

includes priorities and outcomes that have been informed by engagement with looked after children and care leavers.

- Increased focus on strategic leadership to improve management oversight and grip with the introduction of a Performance and Finance Board chaired by the Executive Director Children and Public Health.
- All Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) managers have been offered the opportunity to join the BALI (Black and Asian Leadership Initiative) programme with the Virtual College.

Quality of Practice

- The development offer for social workers has been aligned to the National Assessment and Accreditation Scheme (NAAS) and was launched in September 2021. It was co-designed with the staff rep group.
- A new approach to case auditing was launched in July 2021. The new approach will mean there will be more rigour and consistency to auditing in Children's Services. All auditors have been trained in the 'Beyond Auditing' approach prior to the July 2021 launch, with all Advanced Practitioners, Team Managers, Independent Reviewing Officers and Service Managers now expected to complete audits.
- Positive feedback from the Department for Education's (DfE's) National Care Leaver Adviser on the Children's Service's offer to Southend's care leavers, following a visit by the National Care Leaver Adviser's to view the work of the service and meetings with Southend Care Leavers.

Improve outcomes for Looked After Children (LAC)

- Recruited 8 more Foster Carers.
- Increased management capacity in the Fostering Service, including a new marketing officer to further improve the number of in-house foster carers.
- A Children's Commissioner post has been established to help Children's Services commission good quality placements at the most cost-effective price.
- We have exceeded the target for recruitment of in-house foster carers. 8 carers have been recruited against a target of 6. The target increases to 8 in September
- Following a review of service delivery, a dedicated team for LAC has been created to improve the experience of children and young people with the aim of reducing the number of changes in social worker and increasing their access to life story work. Feedback from the independent advocacy service is that young people feel the change has been positive.

Delivering the right service at the right time

- A focus on early help, supported by agreement to an Early Help Partnership Strategy which was signed off by Southend Strategic Safeguarding Partnership for Children earlier this year, is a key strand of the improvement programme. The impact of the new strategy is not due to be reported on until December 2021.

Financial effectiveness

- A financial recovery plan for Children's Services has been developed and is in place and sits alongside the Children's Services Improvement Plan.

- A reduction in the number of LAC from circa 330 at the end of 2019 to 285 as of September 2021 has contributed to a reduction in the overall overspend of Children's Services. It should be noted that the number of LAC is never static and safeguarding needs are always the priority, but nevertheless this reduction of LAC has helped to reduce the service overspend.
- As of September 2021, there has been a reduction in expenditure on Private Voluntary and Independent (PVI) placements with a reduction of the equivalent of 3 PVI residential placements against the baseline in September 2020.

Shaping Services

- Children and young people involved in shaping the Vision for the Service along with feedback from the Hear Our Voice report in Autumn 2020.
- Established Staff Forum to increase the involvement of staff in shaping the service and its improvement
- Added 2 practitioners to the Improvement Board to ensure that there is a practitioner and frontline perspective on the wider improvement programme and the work of the improvement board.
- The staff rep group, Principal Social Worker Forum and design workshops have contributed to; the social worker development offer, Building Strong Practice programme, the development of the Service Vision, and the pilot Beyond Auditing programme.

3.9 Despite the progress outlined in paragraph 3.8 further work is needed to move the service from Requires Improvement to Good or better and more importantly provide systemic and consistent good or better practice and outcomes for children and young people. Therefore, the focus for the next 6 months and beyond will include: -

- Improve the recruitment and retention of social workers and reduce the number of agency staff.
- Improve Placement stability for children and young people.
- Implement the revised Fostering Improvement Plan to improve the in-house fostering offer.
- Review the pilot new approach to case file auditing and embed and sustain an effective case file audit system and wider quality assurance work to provide better strategic management oversight and grip.
- Improving the engagement and participation of a range of children, young people, and their families.

3.10 Improving the practice and delivering against the focus areas identified in paragraph 3.8 will also improve the financial performance of the service. Improvement to the in-house fostering service should lead to reduce reliance on external residential placements and Independent Fostering placements, although we will always need some, to meet particular needs of children and young people, and lead to greater placement stability. As of period 4 financial monitoring for the current financial year, the projected overspend for the service is £2.453m (excluding the £2.5M one off Children Social Care Reserve funding); this overspend is a positive reduction of (£0.3M) from the ongoing spend pressure of 2020/21 rolling into 2021/22. There is therefore a positive trajectory

of currently forecast reduced overspend spend which is driven by the current reduction in LAC numbers. It should be noted that the service is still waiting to see if there will be any increase in referrals and in turn LAC numbers because of the pandemic.

- 3.11 A Financial Recovery Plan, which sits alongside the Children's Services Improvement Plan is in place to capture where investment has been made to support the improvement programme, to not only improve the service and outcomes for children and young people, but as part of an invest to save approach to reduce reliance on external placements unless a case needs specialist support that cannot be provided by the in-house offer.

4. Other Options

There are none related to this report.

5. Reasons for Recommendations

To update members of the People Scrutiny Committee on the work of the Improvement Board and the wider improvement programme for Children's Services and to clarify the updating arrangements with People 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 5 of the 2050 outcomes.

- 6.2 Financial Implications

See paras 3.10 and 3.11 in this report.

- 6.3 Legal Implications

The Council holds a number of statutory duties for children and young people including those that are LAC, care leavers 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 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](#) Please note the link says draft but this is the version of the 2016 report on the Ofsted website.

Ofsted inspection of Children's Social Care Services report July 2019 [50103322 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](#)

8. Appendices

Children's Service's Improvement Plan v1.1 August to December 2021