

Southend Children's Services: Deep-Dive Summary

Presentation to People Scrutiny: 29th November 2022

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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.

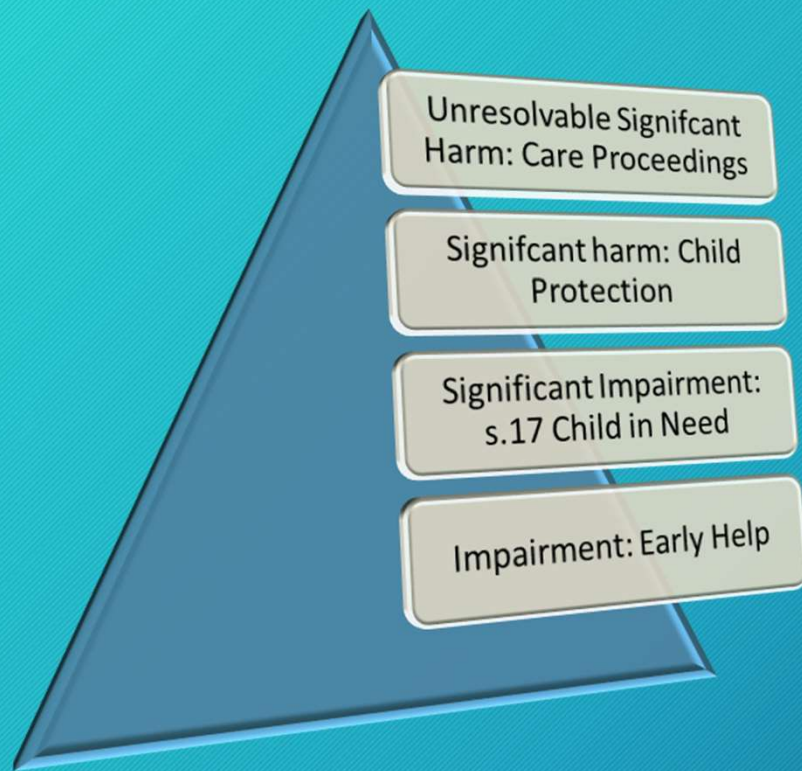
Overarching summary...

- 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...

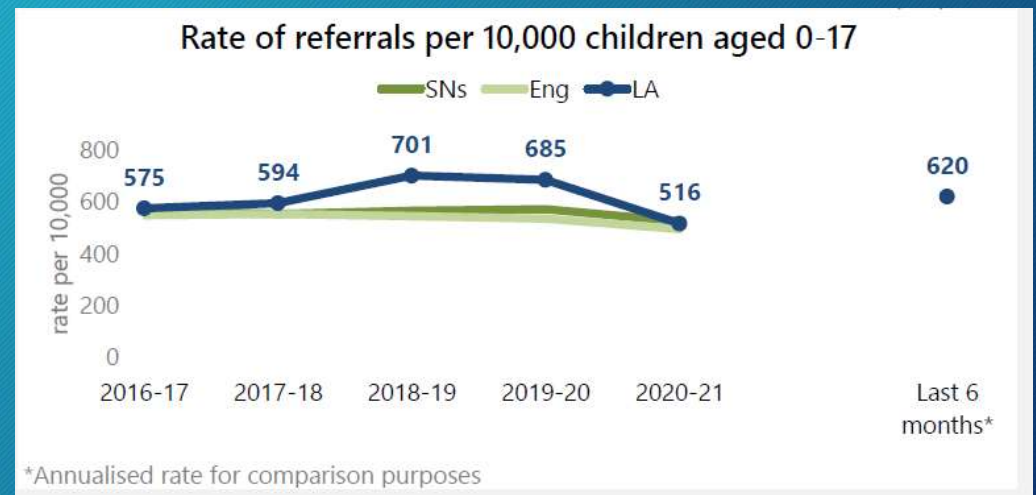


- The legislative threshold for children's social care is very high;
- Families can decline services at s.17;
- The best outcomes are usually achieved by those who know families well offering support and access to services, not referring them on;
- But this can lead to challenges for practitioners working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



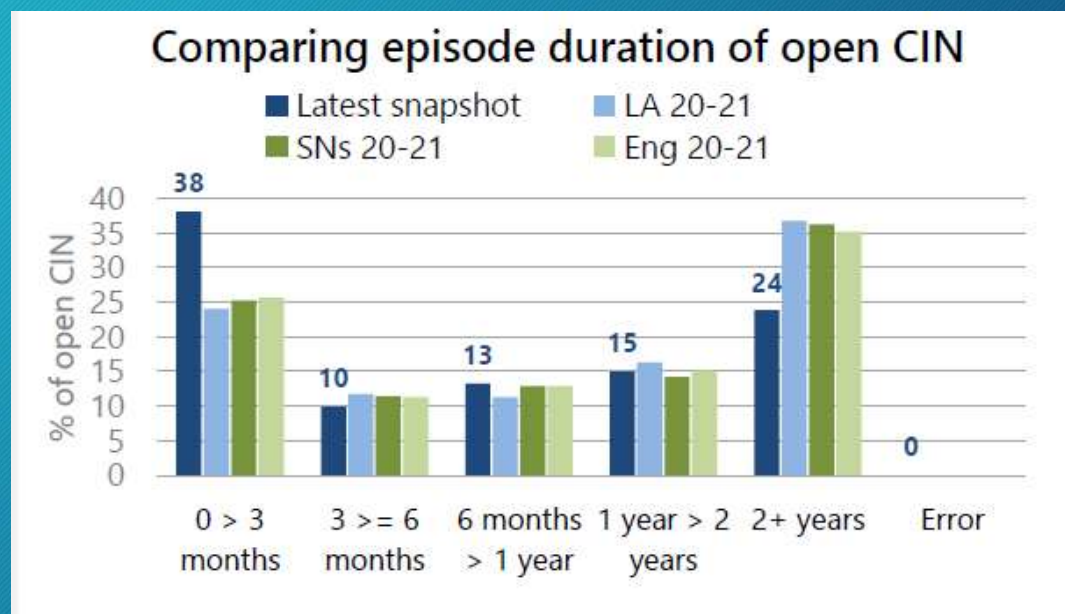
Children in need & in need of protection...

- 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.

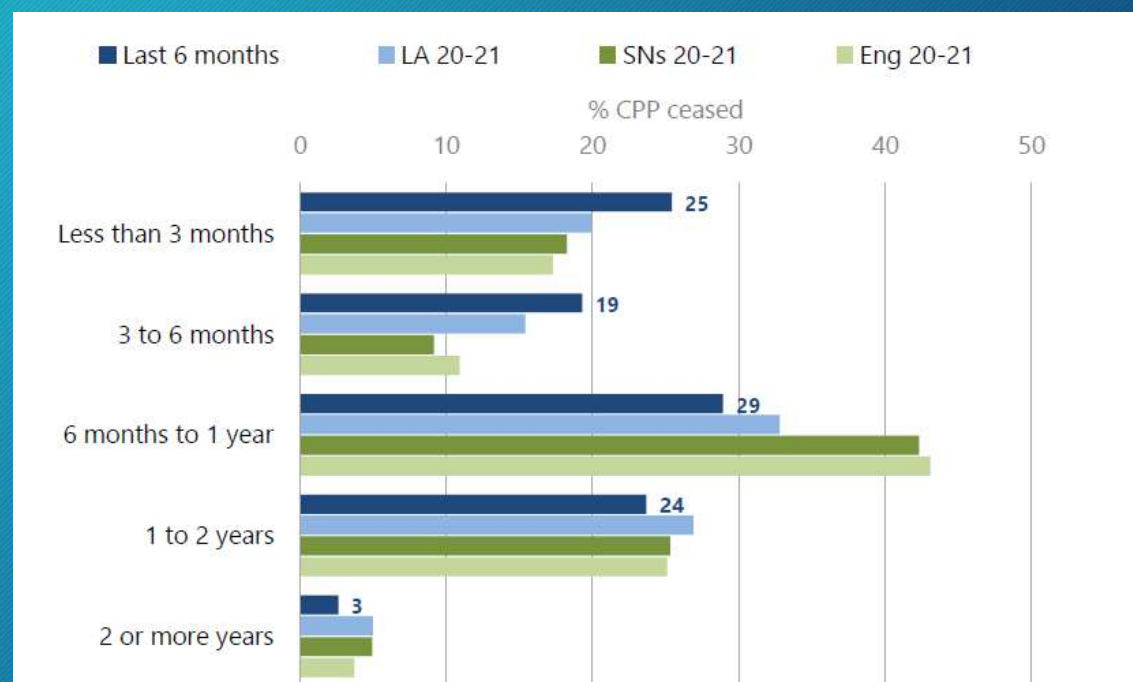
- Length of plans: October 2022:



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.