

Southend-on-Sea City Council

Agenda
Item No.

Report of Executive Director (Children & Public Health)
to

People Scrutiny Committee

on

29th November 2022

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

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)

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 25th 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