

**Meeting:** People Scrutiny  
**Date:** 6 December 2023  
**Classification:** Part 1  
**Key Decision:** No  
**Title of Report:** Ofsted Focus Visit 23-24 May 2023

**Executive Director:** Michael Marks  
**Report Author:** Michael Marks  
**Executive Councillor:** Cllr Helen Boyd

## **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1. From the 23 – 24 May 2023, Southend-on-Sea City Council’s Children’s Service were subject to a 2-day Focus Visit by Ofsted. Ofsted do not provide a judgement for a Focus Visit (FV), as they would for an ILACS (Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Service), but they do produce a letter with their findings which is attached as appendix 1.
- 1.2. Since the last ILACS inspection and a judgement of Requires Improvement (RI) in 2019 the service has prioritised work to improve practice identified in the 2019 Ofsted report. The positive impact of this work was recognised in the May 2023 Focussed Visit (paragraph 3.10).
- 1.3. For this FV inspectors looked at ‘the local authority’s arrangements for children in need or subject to a protection plan’ and identified as a result of their inspection 3 key areas that need to improve in this area of social work practice.’
  - Specificity and timeliness of child in need (CiN) and child protection (CP) plans.
  - The response to children who are living with chronic neglect and/or domestic abuse.
  - Clarity about the legal status, assessment and support provided to those children placed with family and friends due to safeguarding concerns.
- 1.4. Section 3.9 highlights the actions that have been taken so far to address the areas that the FV in May 2023 identified as areas that need to improve and further work is planned to improve that area of practice.
- 1.5. Whilst there is still much to do to improve the service and outcomes for children and young people, this is the most positive Ofsted report on Children’s Services in Southend since a Fostering report 2013.

- 1.6. Sections 3.7 and 3.8 of the report captures some of the findings from the FV but to read the full report please see appendix 1.

## **2. Recommendations**

### **It is recommended that People Scrutiny:**

- 2.1. Notes the outcome from the Ofsted Focus Visit undertaken on 23 – 24 May 2023 and the actions taken so far in response to those findings.

## **3. Background**

- 3.1. Southend Children's Services has been judged as RI in its last 2 full Ofsted inspections in 2016 and 2019.
- 3.2. Following the RI judgements, the Council established a Children's Services Improvement Board. Approximately 18 months ago a retired Director of Children's Services was appointed to be the independent chair of the Improvement Board to accelerate the pace and impact of the improvement programme, providing independent challenge and scrutiny. He will provide his annual update on the improvement programme to the People Scrutiny meeting at its next meeting in February 2024.
- 3.3. Between full inspections Ofsted usually undertake 2 FVs. In March 2022 Ofsted inspectors looked at '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' (a link to that Ofsted report can be accessed at the end of this report).
- 3.4. In addition to the 3 key areas that Ofsted identified need to improve in this area of social work practice (para 1.3) the FV report identified that progress was evident but that some practice areas needed further strengthening.
- 3.5. Ofsted recognised that corporate and political leaders have shown their commitment to the improvement journey and the whole council approach emphasises the priority given to children's social work services.
- 3.6. The report is also positive that the service has engaged external partners to provide independent scrutiny of the service to support and help progress the improvement programme.
- 3.7. Evidence of progress in practice captured in the FV report includes:-
- Social workers know their children well and most children develop strong and trusting relationships with their social workers.
  - For some children direct work is creative and intuitive.
  - Most assessments capture the child's voice, their experiences and family histories. Information is shared by and with the wider professional network, which supports accurate risk assessment.
  - Management oversight is routinely in place and effective.

- The vast majority of children's needs are appropriately identified.
- Strengthened management oversight is supporting effective pre-birth planning and protection for unborn children.
- Leaders have focused on the integration of fathers into social work assessments and interventions, and this is having a positive impact for some children, with fathers supported in their caring roles.
- Multi-agency core groups are held regularly and are effective in supporting the progression of most children's CP plans.
- Comprehensive multi-agency information-sharing takes place at the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), to develop effective initial safety planning. Information provided from MARAC is regularly shared with the child's social worker and available on the child's record.

3.8. Practice areas that need further strengthening captured in the FV report includes:-

- Children's records are variable in quality – some records are too focused on adult self-reporting.
- For some children, plans do not contain specific, time-bound actions and therefore plans are not always progressed within appropriate timescales.
- For a small number of children, gaps in assessment information are evident and assessments are not always updated when children's circumstances change.
- Multi-agency strategy meetings are used effectively to share information to inform risk assessments, although next steps are not always sufficiently detailed, or timebound.
- Core groups and plans for children are not informed by MARAC information; this does not assist in providing a comprehensive understanding of children's experiences
- Some children experience chronic neglect and exposure to domestic violence for too long without positive, sustained change, despite prolonged and repeated social work involvement.
- The graded care profile model of practice to understand and work with children where neglect is a feature is not consistently used.
- There is a lack of clarity and understanding about the legal status, assessment and support provided to a small number of children unable to live safely with their birth parents and a period of alternative care is provided by family and friends.
- For a small number of social workers, high workloads impact on their ability to undertake all the work necessary to build and sustain relationships with children.

3.9. Response and actions taken to the findings and recommendations from the FV.

- Children's service is driving forward work to improve the practice on neglect and domestic abuse including.

- A conference on neglect hosted by the Southend Safeguarding Partnership Children attended by over 200 people from a range of partners agencies and professional backgrounds has been held. Children's services staff also attended this conference.
- A conference for Children's Services staff has been held with a focus on domestic abuse.
- A new threshold document was launched in October 2023 following extensive consultation with partners to ensure the right intervention at the right time by the right person, as part of a new approach to the Early Help offer across the City.
- A new front door, Children's Single Point of Contact (C-SPOC) was launched at the same time as the threshold document in October as the referral route for any safeguarding concerns to Children's Services, including those relating to neglect and/or domestic abuse.
  - Although only recently launched information from the C-SPOC indicates that there is a decrease in the number of referrals to children's services and that the referrals that have been made better align to the thresholds in the revised and relaunched threshold document.
- The Graded care profile has been promoted with partners and with children's services staff to increase its use to help better understand and work with children where neglect is a feature.
- A focussed piece of work with practitioners has been implemented to ensure practitioners better capture on children files information from the MARAC and that social workers consistently attend the MARAC.
- Supervision has and will be used with social workers to improve the specificity and timeliness of CiN and CP plans.
- There has been a decrease in caseloads for social workers since the FV.

3.10. The service has prioritised and worked hard to improve practice identified in the RI Ofsted judgements of 2019 and 2016. The impact of some of this work was captured by Ofsted in the FV in May 2023. It includes:-

- **Supervision** - regularity is improving, although not fully realised for all social workers, and the quality is variable. In better records, supervision provides reflection, analysis, and appropriate case direction although more work is needed to provide time-bound actions.
- Management oversight helps clarify decision-making for children and is mostly consistent.
- **Quality Assurance** – A clearly structured and comprehensive quality assurance framework is in place and used effectively to inform the continuous professional development offer. Quality assurance provides rich information.
- The views of children and young people are integrated into the quality assurance framework
- **Capturing the voice of the child** – Children's records reflect the restorative practice model and records are compassionate and thoughtful.

- **Culture within the service** – Social workers who were spoken to during this visit were positive about working for Southend and reported feeling safe and ‘belonging.’
- Social workers reported that management is thoughtful, considers successes and celebrates good practice.
- Social workers feel supported by the team managers, the senior leadership team are visible and social workers can discuss issues affecting their work with children.
- The workforce benefits from insightful strategic planning to recruit newly qualified social workers over the service establishment; they are given every opportunity to settle in Southend and gain experience so that they do not want to leave.
- The bespoke individual approach to social work learning and development needs is appreciated by staff, and this positively impacts on staff morale, development, and retention.

3.11. There is still more to do but the opportunity to ensure that Southend children and young people that work with the service achieve good or better outcomes is captured towards the end of the FV report when the inspectors recognise that *‘Social workers experience an open, supportive management team and work in an environment where social work practice is developing and beginning to flourish.’*

#### **4. Reasons for Decisions**

4.1. To ensure that the outcomes from the FV in May 2023 are reported to, and scrutinised by, Councillors through the Council’s People Scrutiny Committee.

#### **5. Other Options**

5.1. N/A

#### **6. Financial Implications**

6.1. N/A

#### **7. Legal Implications**

7.1. N/A

#### **8. Policy Context**

8.1 All Local Authority (LA) Children’s services are subject to inspection by the regulator Ofsted. In January 2018, Ofsted adopted a new framework for inspecting local authority services for children in need of help and protection, children we care for (Children in care) and care experienced (care leavers). As well as a full inspection every 3 years (timeframes have slipped slightly due to the pandemic) an LA judged to be RI usually has 2 FV between each full ILACS which focusses on a particular theme.

- 8.2 The ILACS inspects the LA’s services and arrangements for
- The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families.
  - The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection.
  - The experiences and progress of children in care.
  - The experiences and progress of care leavers.
  - Overall effectiveness.

**9. Carbon Impact**

9.1. N/A

**10. Equalities**

10.1. N/A

**11. Consultation**

11.1. N/A

**12. Appendices**

12.1. **Appendices and links:**

**Appendix 1 - Ofsted Focus Visit Report 28 June 2023 - [50221559](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspections/50221559) ([ofsted.gov.uk](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk))**

**Ofsted Focus Visit Report 9 May 2022 – [50182671](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspections/50182671) ([ofsted.gov.uk](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk))**

**13. Report Authorisation**

<b>This report has been approved for publication by:</b>		
	<b>Name:</b>	<b>Date:</b>
S151 Officer	Joe Chesterton	24 Nov 2023
Monitoring Officer	Kim Sawyer	24 Nov 2023
Executive Director(s)	Michael Marks	23 Nov 2023
Relevant Cabinet Member(s)	Cllr Helen Boyd	24 Nov 2023