

Southend Children's Services: Improvement Board Report

Presentation to People Scrutiny: February 14th 2024

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Introduction & background...

- I am an experienced senior leader in children's services and former DCS. I now undertake improvement work as a DfE Improvement Adviser among other roles;
- I was appointed by Southend as an independent improvement adviser in July 2022;
- My role is to offer support & challenge to Children's Services;
- This includes chairing the Improvement Board;
- I attended People Scrutiny in November 2022 to present an overview of a deep-dive activity undertaken in July/August 2022;
- I am here today to provide People Scrutiny with an update on the work of the Improvement Board and the improvement journey of Children's Services more generally since then.

Over-arching summary

- Children's services have made good progress overall over the last 18 months;
- The leadership team have established good processes to assure themselves of the quality of practice;
- An effective and detailed improvement plan is in place that is regularly updated;
- Leaders are visible to staff including through weekly KIT meetings;
- While some staff report that workload is high, overall caseloads are now mostly within acceptable levels;
- Focused action is being taken to address some long-standing issues, including:
 - Implementing a new model of front door;
 - Launching revised thresholds early help frameworks in consultation with partners.

Ofsted focussed visit: May 2023

- Areas where further improvement was needed identified by inspectors included:
 - Specificity and timeliness of plans;
 - Response to children experiencing neglect and/or domestic abuse;
 - Some children's records, which were too heavily reliant on adult self-reporting or adult focused;
- Importantly, however, inspectors were positive about the change in culture and the impact of leaders on practice;
- Inspectors also identified that the self-assessment was thorough and provided accurate information on service performance and priorities for development.

Ofsted focussed visit: May 2023

- ‘Leaders in Southend are firmly centred on delivering strengthened social work practice and creating the culture and environment for effective child-focused services. This has led to some significant improvements in the areas considered by this visit...’
- ‘Corporate and political leaders have shown their commitment to the improvement journey and this whole-council approach emphasises the priority given to children’s social work services. The director of children’s services is engaging with independent improvement partners, who assist in providing robust external scrutiny. While progress is evident, inspectors identified some areas of practice which require further strengthening.’

Improvement board...

- The Improvement Board meets approximately once in six weeks;
- Excellent engagement by corporate and cross-party political leadership;
- Includes staff representation & chair of Southend Safeguarding Partnership;
- Promotes open discussion of areas of strength and areas for development;
- The quality of analysis and action planning from heads of service and others has improved significantly over the last 18 months.

Improvement board...

- It is clear that leaders know their service areas increasingly well;
- Practice focus areas come to the Improvement Board, most recently on support to care experienced young people;
- This included:
 - Good analysis of quality assurance & performance information;
 - Identified areas for improvement and actions to be taken;
 - A focus on ensuring that young people are enabled to achieve good outcomes.
- Over coming months, the board will maintain oversight of particular areas of practice, including:
 - Plans that are co-produced with parents;
 - The voice of the child;
 - The impact of changes to Early Help.

Performance indicators...

- Rates of children subject to child protection planning are relatively low;
- Managers have taken action to ensure that child protection processes are being used appropriately and addressed some earlier over-optimism leading plans to end early;
- Children in care numbers remain above the average of similar areas, although have reduced over last 6 months;
- Placement stability indicators for children in care have improved;
- Performance indicators for care experienced young people are generally good;
- The fostering programme is having impact on recruitment of new carers and has improved the support to existing carers.

Staffing and vacancies...

- Recruitment and retention of experienced and qualified social workers is a national challenge;
- Southend has relatively low rates of uncovered vacancies;
- Staff morale feels much improved compared with the time of my deep-dive in August 2022;
- Use of agency social work staff remains quite high at 25%, though not an outlier in the region;
- Looking at ways of to tell the positive story about Southend, reviewing recruitment materials and so on;
- Recent success in permanent senior appointments.

Changes to front door & launch of C-SPOC

- An important area of positive change;
- Rates of social work assessments and child protection enquiries have been historically high in Southend;
- This is problematic because:
 - Over-intervention is experienced negatively by families and often reduces the likelihood of engagement with support services at a later date;
 - Dilutes staffing and partner resources available to work with children with the greatest needs;
 - Is wasteful of resources that could be better spent supporting children and their families as opposed to assessing them;
- Launch of new model, thresholds guidance and support to managers and practitioners is having significant positive impact.

Changes to front door & launch of C-SPOC

- Work is now underway across the partnership to embed the strengths-based restorative practice approach to supporting children and families through early help;
- Partners have signed up to the principles behind the 'Family Help' pathfinder and a bid for pilot status has been made;
- The challenge is ensuring that strategic agreement is reflected in front-line engagement with children and families;
- This requires a significant culture change and will take time;
- Safeguarding children partnership is providing active support and training resources in this area, however.

Key priorities for 2024...

- Continuing the positive development of the Corporate Parenting Board and demonstrating impact;
- Maximising participation by children & young people and linking to outcomes;
- Delivering impact from re-launched early help framework including specifically in respect of neglect;
- Taking forward the principles of the family help pathfinder;
- Embedding practice changes and tool kits relating to domestic abuse;
- Continued focus on practice more generally: Planning, quality of direct work, supervision and case-recording;
- Making things even better through development of co-produced plans for children, including safety plans.

Key priorities for 2024...

- Making our processes and systems child and parent friendly as far as we can, for example in the way that we communicate important information;
- Increasing the proportion of children and young people benefiting from permanency in foster care, safe return home, SGO and Adoption;
- Continuing to work with partners to ensure that children access timely health assessments and dental care;
- Ensuring that conference chairs and reviewing officers are proactive in ensuring good outcomes for children and young people.
- Maximising impact of improvement partner [Islington] and internal practice and performance surgeries;
- Ensuring the service is accurately reflected in its self-assessment.

Concluding remarks...

- Southend feels a very different place to where things were 18 months ago;
- Then, leaders had a good grip on what needed to change, but impact on outcomes was still limited;
- Since then, positive impact on practice and outcomes for children is apparent, as recognised by Ofsted;
- Children's services are inherently vulnerable and continued focus on ensuring consistency of practice is essential;
- The Covid pandemic delayed improvement work and continues to have other impacts, but the framework for ensuring continuous improvement is now in place and is having impact for children.