

Meeting: People Scrutiny Committee
Date: 14th February 2024
Classification: Part 1
Key Decision: No
Title of Report: Update on Children's Services Improvement Programme

Executive Director: Michael Marks
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Children's Services
Executive Councillor: Cllr Helen Boyd

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. This paper provides a brief update to Councillors on the work of the Children's Services Improvement Board in supporting children's services to enable vulnerable children and young people to achieve consistently good outcomes.
- 1.2. The independent improvement adviser has provided a presentation outlining progress and key developments over the last 12 months, which will be discussed further at the Scrutiny meeting on 14th February 2024.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that People Scrutiny Committee:

- 2.1. **Notes the progress made by the leadership team, managers and practitioners in children's services in improving the quality of services to children, young people and their families over the last 18 months;**
- 2.2. **Notes the priority areas for continued service development for 2024.**

3. Background

- 3.1. At the most recent full inspection by Ofsted in 2019, children's services in Southend were judged to require improvement in order to be good.
- 3.2. Leaders of children's services in Southend are committed to ensuring that children, young people and their families achieve consistently good outcomes. They have led a number of changes to secure improvements in service delivery since the last full inspection.

- 3.3. I was appointed as independent improvement adviser to Southend children's services in July 2022. My role is to provide support and challenge to the leadership, and to chair the Southend Children's Services Improvement Board.
- 3.4. The Improvement Board meets approximately once every 6 weeks.
Membership includes:
- Cabinet portfolio holder;
 - Opposition Cabinet portfolio holder;
 - Chief Executive of the Council;
 - Independent Safeguarding Adviser to the Southend Strategic Safeguarding Partnership;
 - Representatives of frontline practitioners;
 - Executive Director, Children and Public Health;
 - Director of Education, Early Years and Inclusion;
 - Head of HR and payroll;
 - The Director of Children's Social Work, Early Help and Youth Support Services and members of her leadership team also attend the board.
- 3.5. Over the past 18 months, the Board has focused on ensuring that leaders in children's services have an accurate understanding of the strengths and areas of development across the service.
- 3.6. This activity has resulted in a significantly refreshed and detailed improvement plan.
- 3.7. The service has made improvements in many areas, including:
- Increasing the visibility of the leadership team in establishing a positive culture across the service;
 - Supporting managers to effectively analyse information from quality assurance activity and performance measures to improve the experience of vulnerable children, young people and their families;
 - Taking action to improve the support available to children and young people who experience neglectful parenting and/or neglect;
 - Ensuring greater consistency of management oversight and supervision;
 - Launching revised threshold policies and early help frameworks in consultation with the wider partnership;
 - Re-modelling the 'front door' to children's services;
 - Engaging partners in a bid for pilot status as a family help pathfinder;
 - Improving the offer to foster carers, leading to increased recruitment activity.
- 3.8. Priority areas for development in 2024 include:
- Embedding the restorative practice model in Southend across the partnership, so that children and families benefit from a consistent relationship-based approach to help and support;
 - Improving confidence across the partnership in supporting families, particularly where children and young people are experiencing neglect;

- Maintaining a focus on ensuring that plans for children are of consistently good quality and that children and families benefit from consistently good practice;
 - Ensuring that practitioners are accessing consistently good supervision and management oversight;
 - Maintaining the focus on recruitment and retention, particularly of experienced and qualified staff, and on staff development.
- 3.9. Ofsted undertook a focussed visit in May 2023, which assessed the quality of service for children in need and in need of protection. The outcome of this inspection was broadly positive, while identifying areas where continued development was needed. This is positive, but the reality is that children's services must continually adapt and improve in order to meet increasing expectations of quality.
- 3.10. Both Ofsted and Government expect local partnerships to support continuously improving services for children, young people and their families. An example is the introduction by Ofsted of a separate inspection judgement relating to the progress being made by care experienced young people. This change reflects the increasing expectations around what care-experienced young people should expect in terms of the quality of support they receive.
- 3.11. This means that while there have been significant improvements made across the service over the last 18 months, the need for continued focus on improving outcomes will remain.

4. Reasons for Decisions

- 4.1. To ensure that Members of People Scrutiny have oversight of the improvement work taking place in Children's Services.

5. Other Options

- 5.1. There are none related to this report.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1. Children's services include a number of demand-led budgets.
- 6.2. Of particular concern nationally is the increasing cost of placements for children in care, which has also had an impact on overall costs in Southend.

7. Legal Implications

- 7.1. 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, 1989.

8. Policy Context

8.1 This report links directly to the Council's Corporate Priority to deliver a safe City with a good quality of life for all.

9. Carbon Impact

9.1. Not applicable.

10. Equalities

10.1. No direct implications.

11. Consultation

11.1. Not applicable.

12. Appendices

12.1. **Appendix 1**: Presentation to Committee: 'Southend Children's Services: Improvement Board Report.

13. Report Authorisation

This report has been approved for publication by:		
	Name:	Date:
S151 Officer	Joe Chesterton	06/02/24
Monitoring Officer	Kim Sawyer	05/02/24
Executive Director(s)	Michael Marks	05/02/24
Relevant Cabinet Member(s)	Cllr Helen Boyd	06/02/24