



Department
for Education

Delivery of Children's Services in Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council

**Report for the Secretary of State for
Education**

September 2022

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Introduction: The Role of the Commissioner

The Department for Education appointed the Commissioner on 22 May 2022, the Commissioner undertook a review of Children's Service from June 2022 to September 2022.

Sefton has been found to be 'inadequate' across all key judgements in the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) conducted in February 2022 by Ofsted and in the formal report published in May 2022. This is part of several years of decline in the quality of services locally. There is a presumption in cases of persistent or systemic failure that children's social care services will be removed from council control in order to bring about sustainable improvement, unless there are compelling reasons not to do so. In line with the recommendations set out in the Ofsted report of children's social care, published 9 May 2022, the Children's Services Commissioner for Sefton is expected to take the following steps:

- To issue any necessary instructions to the Council for the purpose of securing immediate improvement in the Council's delivery of children's social care; to identify ongoing improvement requirements; and to recommend any additional support required to deliver those improvements.
- To bring together evidence to assess the Council's capacity and capability to improve itself, in a reasonable timeframe, and recommend whether this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care can be achieved should operational service control continue to remain with the Council.
- To advise on relevant alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's social care, outside of the operational control of the Council, taking account of local circumstances and the views of the Council and key partners.
- To report to the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State by the end of September 2022.

Executive summary and recommendations to the Secretary of State for Education

Whilst the Council has made a good start to its improvement work through new leadership arrangements, readiness to accept support, the start of a cultural shift and sound actions to construct its improvement programme, its progress remains hampered by workforce challenges, quality of practice, which is still not good enough, and as yet ineffective and unaligned improvement mechanisms. The means and mechanisms for delivering sustained improvement are not yet secured.

In the next six to nine months there needs to be significant additional pace to the improvement work and a much greater grip to support building traction and momentum. Improvement planning and investment need stronger focus on medium- and long-term sustainability to give assurance to local leaders and citizens, along with the Department and Ofsted that improvements will embed beyond the initial improvement activity.

In considering the next phase of intervention and potential directions, whilst there is evidence that trusts can make an impact and engage a workforce in a new start which is attractive, at this juncture this would be time consuming and would further delay improvements in my view because it would distract from the core work of improvement. Whilst not entirely disregarding this as a possible future option, dependent on progress, there is a need to allow time for the new leadership team to bed in and be supported to bring about the changes required. I would also argue there is not a need to look at another council to take over the running of children's services for similar reasons I am not, therefore, making recommendations for alternative delivery models at this stage. However, there is still some way to go before I would be confident the Council can make the huge transformations required without continued specialist sector support and focused oversight from the Department. The Council will now benefit from a series of Ofsted Monitoring Visits, and these should be seen as part of the learning and improvement cycle, driving progress on establishing these foundations, and measuring impact at each visit.

In addition to this over-arching recommendation regarding delivery model, a series of detailed improvement recommendations have also been made to the Council, and these are reproduced in the section titled recommendations to Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council.

The Local Authority Area: Sefton

Sefton is a metropolitan borough of Merseyside, and its local authority is Sefton Council. Sefton was formed, following the Local Government Act 1972, on 1 April 1974. It was an amalgamation of the former county boroughs of Bootle and Southport, and from the administrative county of Lancashire, the municipal borough of Crosby, the urban districts of Formby and Litherland, and part of the Rural District of West Lancashire. It also formed part of the then new county of Merseyside. The Borough consists of a coastal strip of land on the Irish Sea and extends from the primarily industrial area of Bootle in the south to the traditional seaside resort of Southport in the north. In the south-east it extends inland to Maghull. Sefton has an approximate area of some 155km². The district is bounded by Liverpool to the south, Knowsley to the south-east, and West Lancashire to the east. Sefton is one of six councils that make up the Liverpool City Region (LCR). Since 1 April 2014 some of the Borough's responsibilities have been pooled with neighbouring authorities within the metropolitan area and subsumed into the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. The combined authority has effectively become the top-tier administrative body for the local governance of the city region with the leader of Sefton Council, along with the five other leaders from neighbouring local government districts, taking strategic decisions over economic development, transport, employment and skills, tourism, culture, housing, and physical infrastructure. The Borough has a number of nationally and internationally important attractions including: the Aintree Grand National, Anthony Gormley's Another Place at Crosby Beach, the Southport Flower Show, the National Musical Fireworks Championship, the Southport Air Show and regular major golf tournaments hosted at Royal Birkdale Golf Club¹.

The Cabinet is comprised of the Leader of the Council and nine Cabinet Members of the Council, each has responsibility for a defined service area (portfolio). Within the budgetary and policy frameworks set by the full Council, the Cabinet is responsible for carrying out almost all the Council's functions in delivering services to the community. In May 2021 new arrangements for Cabinet Member roles regarding Children's Services were introduced, with the introduction of specific roles of Cabinet Member, Education, and Cabinet Member, Children's Social Care.

In its entirety, Sefton is in the most deprived fifth of English Local Authorities, with 27 of the 189 Sefton Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA) being in the top 5% nationally (17 of these being in South Sefton). However, other parts of the Borough, particularly in the middle and north, are some of the least deprived areas, with seven LSOAs (six of which are in north Sefton) were in the least deprived 5% of areas nationally. Sefton has a low proportion of residents from minority ethnic groups, with 95% of the population being White British, higher than rates seen across Liverpool City Region 92%, the North West 87% and England 79% (9.8%).

¹ <https://www.sefton.gov.uk/media/1061/seftonpeopleandplaceprofile.pdf>

Sefton has a population of approximately 275,899, 23.7% of the population is 65 years old or over (65,463); it is ranked 24th out of 309 local authorities for the number of residents aged 65 or over. Approximately one in five residents are aged under 18 (54,098). Projections show the overall numbers of young people 0-19 will remain relatively stable over the next two decades, though with significant inter-age group variation.

18% of children and young people under the age of 19 in Sefton are living in low-income households, a similar picture to the national picture at 18.2%, though lower than the regional figure which is 22.4%.

21.3% of pupils attending a Sefton school are eligible for Free School Meals; this is 0.5% higher than the national figure of 20.8% and 3.5% lower than the regional North West figure of 23.8%.

5.8% of pupils educated in Sefton have English as an additional language, compared to 15.3% in the Northwest and 19.2% nationally.

15.2% of pupils educated in Sefton are recorded as special educational needs (SEN), of these 3.2% of pupils have a formal SEN education, health and care (EHC) plan in place and 11.8% of pupils are recorded as receiving SEN Support.

According to the school census of January 2021, there were 40,056 children and young people aged 2 to 18 years who are educated in 103 Sefton state funded, maintained nursery, primary, secondary, sixth form, special schools, and pupil referral units (PRUs). There are three Further Education establishments catering for 16- to 19-year old key stage 5 students. 9% of primary schools and 61% of secondary schools have converted to academies.

In February 2017 Sefton had 436 Cared for Children, by February 2022 this had risen to 619 and from this point the numbers have been maintained. There are currently 2698 Children in Need and 398 children on child protection plans. The table below provides current actuals and comparative rates per 10,000 children of population for children under the age of 18. The rates of Children in Need, Child Protection and Cared for Children are significantly higher than the England, North West and statistical neighbour averages.

Table 1: Actual and rates per 10,000 for Children in Need, Child Protection and Care for Children

	20/09/2022	Sefton 20/09/2022	ENG*	SN*	NW**
Children in Need	2698	498	321	360	381
Child Protection	398	74	41	47	49
Cared for Children	615	114	67	49	97
			Rate per 10,000		

Source: *Latest published rates for ENG and SN are 2021
 Source: **Latest available figures for NW Q4 are 2021/22

The challenges as described by Ofsted

The quality of provision and outcomes for children, young people and families has seen a continuous decline in recent years. A worrying Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) in September 2019 (published December 2019) raised concerns around partnership working, front door arrangements and commissioning, and a Focused Visit in March 2021 (published May 2021) highlighted concerns around key areas of social worker capacity, managing safeguarding risks and quality assurance arrangements. Although the Council responded, a combination of funding challenges and an unsettled period involving interim leadership fettered effective progress and led to further legacy issues. Whilst the Council were aware of this challenging environment, there was some optimism about some progress having been made and although there was anticipation of a likely critical inspection in February to May 2022, the extent of the overall failure and the bleak inspection report (published in May 2022) was not anticipated and in discussion, the Leader expressed determination to do “everything in his power” to turn the situation around.

The inspection found serious and systemic failings across all aspects of Social Care provision and recognised this as part of a trajectory of deterioration since 2016. Key concerns included the following findings:

- Council responses to children in need of help and protection in Sefton are inadequate due to serious and widespread failures in safeguarding children. Throughout help and protection services, there is drift and delay in children having their needs met in part due to insufficient workforce capacity and lack of management oversight and challenge. This results in highly vulnerable children remaining at risk of significant harm.
- The Council and Senior Leaders have not sufficiently understood these failures or taken the necessary actions to improve services for children.
- The fragmentation and dispersal of a wide range of Children’s Services across the Council has not enabled the Council, Leaders and Senior Managers to have an effective oversight of Children’s Services. As a result, shortfalls identified in and since 2016 have not been systematically addressed to make a difference to children, and poor practice previously identified is still present.
- This inspection has identified both serious and widespread failures in core areas of social work practice including assessment, planning, and management oversight. There is insufficient capacity across the workforce to secure a timely and appropriate response for children. As a result, some children are left with inadequate protection, and experience delays in having their needs met, including the need for timely permanence.

The report is clear that current concerns identified were not a short-term dip or ‘eye off the ball’ situation but were persistent and enduring over several years and that work to address them had been ineffective, thus further embedding the elements which have in turn compounded failure.

In my view front line staff recognised this more readily than local leaders, and there was anticipation among them of a poor outcome from the inspection.

Staff said:

“The inspection outcome didn’t come as a shock, since 2017 we’ve lost so many experienced good staff because the structure didn’t work. ASYE’s were left with heavy caseloads because of the churn of staff”.

Young people too had been dissatisfied with their experience of services.

A care experience young person said:

“I’ve had a good experience with the Leaving Care Service but some of my friends complained that they were fed up with having to repeat their story too many times because a different worker would turn up each month”.

This experience of having multiple workers is borne out across all case types seen as part of this analysis.

Methodology

This analysis has been conducted over the period from June 2022 to September 2022. My work as Commissioner has included the following:

- Review of policy and practice documentation,
- Analysis financial information, inspection reports, improvement reports and data,
- Meetings with local leaders, including politicians from the administration and opposition parties, senior leaders in the Council and partner agencies and meetings with front line staff,
- Meeting with young people in receipt of services,
- Letters from parents and carers of families in receipt of services,
- Audit of current case files and review of current quality assurance arrangements,
- Review of the current improvement plan and the arrangements for its implementation and oversight,
- Observation of the Improvement Board.

During this review I have also benefitted from discussions with the Improvement Advisor, with colleagues from the Department for Education and Ofsted. I am grateful for the time people have given to engage and express their views, which has greatly assisted in gaining an understanding of the strengths and challenges in Sefton. I have been welcomed and ably supported throughout.

Key Issues

Although the inspection recognised some early indications of improvement, for example around strengthening the voice of the child, it considered these to be not yet secure or embedded. This raises a key issue for the Council in terms of its capacity to deliver sustainable improvement over time; the experience of initial improvement after the 2019 Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) inspection, followed by further deterioration is indicative of this, and the analysis presented in this report seeks to explore the long-term capacity required to make the shift towards sustained investment and improvement.

Having reviewed this history and trajectory, there is clear evidence in my view that services had deteriorated since 2016 and the Council had lost sight of their responsibilities to effectively monitor services. Ineffective governance, poor performance management arrangements and quality assurance processes meant that senior leaders were not aware of the quality of services provided or how resources were being allocated and delivering impact. Current arrangements around these core elements of improvement, and the traction so far gained have formed key considerations around progress, pace and capacity for continuous and sustainable improvement.

The Council has responded swiftly to the outcome of the 2022 inspection, creating additional leadership capacity and appointing a new Executive Director of Childrens Services (DCS) with extensive experience in children's social care as an Assistant Director (AD), including turning around a failing service. Additional capacity has been created at Assistant Director level and the new post holders are also talented and experienced as individuals. Although this team is clearly working hard and are developing good proposals for the machinery of improvement, including the remediation of the failure in core functions, they will need to coalesce into an effective force for fully implementing and tracking these actions, and for leading the cultural shift required to embed them into the new business as usual. These leaders will need to give relentless direction and clarity of expectation to the workforce to lift the sense of feeling overwhelmed by the improvement work and the additional demands brought by an ineffective system. There is, for example, a strong culture of non-compliance which has become a custom and practice coping strategy, and it is critical that the existing workforce are supported in lifting themselves out of this and ensuring that new recruits, and especially those newly qualified, are not absorbed into it. An example of this is that following feedback on case concerns after the audit work in this review, senior leaders acted immediately to set out actions to address these; however, these expectations were not met by managers and practitioners, and the mechanisms to track these required actions were not there, leading to unacceptable drift in the required responses, some of which related to children's safety.

Senior leaders have a core foundation task to develop and implement a coherent improvement plan, a performance and quality framework and operational strategies built from a clearly articulated vision which are visibly defined in team plans and individual appraisal, creating the 'golden thread' of everyone having a key role in improvement.

These are very significant foundations of improvement which need to be relentlessly driven, and further pace to the implementation will need to occur over the next 6 to 9 months.

Although the Council is experiencing recruitment difficulties, some very good staff have remained; despite having borne the burden of a lack of a permanent workforce prior to the inspection, they are highly committed and keen to make the improvements, and there is strong evidence of them bouncing back, with morale largely being good, despite the challenges.

Staff report a more positive experience of organisational culture since the new senior team have been in place, citing more visibility of leaders and a culture of openness, describing the DCS and ADs as 'walking the walk' and putting social work at the forefront of their minds when presenting information. The open-door policy is a clear shift away from the interim model which was limited in impact and creating an 'us and them' experience for some frontline staff and managers.

Staff said:

"It felt like the past senior managers had stopped listening to us and we could see things unravelling, leaders just kept out of the way until it was too late to make changes".

"We've been impressed with the approach taken by DCS and his team – more open, visible and approachable".

"It feels more safe than it has for a long time, managers are listening and available, it's beginning to feel like a good place to work again".

These are very positive gains for the leadership to have made, in gaining the trust of a weary and demoralised workforce increasing their professional confidence and their sense of being valued. This is a key foundation for onward improvement. Nevertheless, recruitment remains a major challenge, with over reliance on agency staff and 'managed service' teams. As is often the case with long term failure, the workforce has not yet been sufficiently skilled and developed, and they are now dealing with very complex legacy cases which also result from previous safeguarding failure.

There are constructive plans in place to recruit to new key roles, such as the practice development social workers and the Social Work Academy staff, plus new experienced Heads of Service are joining the Council in September, but recruitment in the region is highly competitive and the council will need to review its market position in terms of pay rates and benefits for existing staff.

The plans to develop the Social Work Academy are very positive, demonstrating a commitment to quality practice learning. It is not yet clear what the implementation

timescale will be, and what benefits are expected and when, for example impact on caseloads, and this needs to be made explicit. However, the depth of poor practice goes across the workforce, and not just those who are new to the social work profession, and the Council will need to significantly extend its practice learning programme.

The work being supported by Leeds City Council on the Family Values approach is very positive, giving a good value-driven basis upon which good relational practice can thrive. However, this is a framework and not a practice model, and current work shows elements of various previous models still apparent in casework. The appointment of the new Principal Social Worker in August 2022 is a positive step, and the post holder will need to bring consistency and much greater quality to practice delivery. Again, clarity of expectation around practice quality is key. Family work, and social work in particular is a highly technical function, underpinned by a complex legal framework, and examination of current practice shows major deficits in knowledge and application in these areas:

- Assessments are still descriptive and lack critical thinking and analysis. They have no hypothesis and do not use research evidence to enhance critical analysis. A lack of curiosity and deep exploration of available information is apparent, with a snapshot approach and taking headlines and face value of information, focusing only on the present. A major area for learning and development is to assist staff in understanding how family history, including parents' own experience of being parented informs powerful repeating patterns and family scripts which influence current risks and strengths, and the likelihood of long-term sustainable change. Assessment do not currently consider what life will be like for a child in 3, 6, or 10 years, and importantly, how good enough parenting of a baby will translate into managing adolescence.
- Children's plans are still often poor, they lack purpose, actions are not clearly attributable nor are completion dates evident in most cases. Actions are generally not linked to bespoke outcomes for an individual child; standard statements are often included, which could apply to any child. The generalised nature of outcomes makes it difficult to see what difference has been made. Many plans have elements of drift, some of which impact on the safety and life chances of the child. The governance around planning is therefore not effective in driving plans forward. In implementing plans, in many instances, case records do not reflect that staff understand the purpose of statutory visits and the importance of core groups and Child in Need meetings.
- There is a variation in practice around safeguarding strategy discussions. Where police and other partners attend these are much better quality, but police are often not in attendance, and some strategy meetings are just the social worker and team manager. In a small number of cases, strategy discussions have not been held when an incident warranted it, but in the main there is a good response in planning around incidents and concerns.

- There is still variation in practice relating to young people who go missing and are vulnerable to exploitation. Whilst there is evidence of risk assessments, there are also examples where practitioners were too easily reassured around risks reducing, and not always live to picking up new signs of potential risk.
- There is a need for additional learning across the workforce, for example there are gaps in knowledge and understanding of the law and associated regulations. Areas identified include very limited understanding of the Public Law Outline, placement regulations, the Southwark Judgement, connected carers and Regulation 24 and S38(6), viability assessments and court procedures. The quality of court reports is sometimes poor, with challenges from the court about not meeting timescales, and reports which do not demonstrate the rationale for orders sought. This impacts on the Council's reputation with the Family Court and raises the issue of quality assurance and sign off, from social work managers and the legal team.

Leaders are aware of these deficits, and work now needs to move at pace to address these. Good work has taken place around revising practice standards, and leaders recognise that previous work to simply distribute new policy and practice materials will not deliver the required take up, compliance and quality shift which is required. Engagement events with staff and young people are planned in September to finalise the standards, and a 'practice week' is planned for October, but the Council will need to facilitate an immersive practice learning programme for staff to ensure that the knowledge base is firm, and that staff are confident about the application of the new standards. There is still work to do to ensure that a suitable repository for policies and procedures exists. Although the Safeguarding Partnership has published some policies and procedures, the 'Tri-ex' system of operational practice procedures is not yet fully functional, and the work with staff and young people in September and October will need to have pace and depth to deliver this key aspect of supporting good quality work which meets statutory requirements. Recent work to reinvigorate corporate parenting is positive, and this will need extensive Council wide political and corporate ownership.

A comprehensive Practice Learning Programme to encompass core aspects of practice, including a supervision component, should be planned into the coming 12 months to build in a culture of a learning organisation which learns together and creating a reliable set of competences from which to build. The learning culture can be further embedded through protected time for team learning and development, for example through a monthly 'Stop the Clock' protected learning time approach.

The SEND Continuous Improvement Board (SENDICIB) was introduced in 2019 in response to an Improvement Notice. This is a partnership board, led by the Council, committed to delivering the actions that will improve the lives and life chances of Sefton's children and young people with SEND. The Improvement Notice was lifted in July 2021 and the Local Area is committed to continuing with SENDICIB and associated subgroups. The DfE noted, "the evidence from the review demonstrates the significant progress Sefton and partners has made and its success in addressing and embedding

the improvements identified in Ofsted's/Care Quality Commission (CQC) revisit in 2019. Leadership has improved its operational oversight, the workforce is dedicated and engaged in delivering quality outcomes, there is improved partnership working and there is a collective commitment across the Council to improve and achieve the best possible outcomes for children and young people with SEND.”

However, the service has recently experienced a further decline in performance, with significant challenges in respect of staffing and the increase in the number requests for EHCP's. Plans are in place to address the performance issues and additional capacity has been secured to strategically oversee the work of the Local Area Partnership and to improve the operation of the SEND Service. Since 2019 the Council has invested significant capital into existing schools in the Borough which will create additional places and reduce the need for Out of Borough places plus additional revenue in excess of £400k in staffing.

In light of the new SEND Inspection framework the partnership is preparing to review the current Improvement Plan to ensure that it reflects the national evaluation criteria. A key area of focus in the coming months will be the continued engagement with families. The experience of improvement and then decline in service quality in this service area demonstrates the need for relentless focus on sustained improvement, so that good gains are not lost, and the learning from this experience should be applied to the overall improvement approach.

There are areas of work beyond quality of practice which need significant additional and specialist capacity in order to drive the pace and quality of sustainable improvement. These include quality assurance, performance management, project management, business support and commissioning.

Limited progress has been made on developing performance management systems and dashboards in part due to limited resources available. The Council has commissioned an external review of the LiquidLogic system, and the actions arising from this now need to be driven at pace, alongside work to deliver a reliable dashboard to support managers and to deliver credible and timely reporting on performance.

The quality assurance arrangements are significantly underdeveloped and do not have sufficient resources to deliver this core function. The resource around case audit is currently outsourced to three auditors, and the approach is insufficiently focused on quality and learning to drive the improvement required. These auditors undertake all of the case audit work in children's social care; therefore, the volumes are low, and this does not afford the Council with reliable assurance around quality of practice. It also feeds a culture of quality assurance not being owned by operational staff. The current plan to appoint the practice development workers is currently capped at two and this will coincide with the ending of the contracts with the external auditors. The Council needs much greater capacity for this function, including the extension of auditing function into the whole of the management cohort, and sufficient administrative capacity to drive audit function and the tracking, analysis and reporting which will support the learning and

assurance cycle. The existing quality framework, completed in 2018 had sound elements of quality assurance practice, including the involvement of all managers in case auditing. In recent years, the implementation of this has changed, removing this key function from managers in response to workload levels. This was a retrograde step and has contributed to a system-wide failure around assurance and quality. Work is currently under way to develop a new performance and quality framework; exemplar materials on effective frameworks have been shared with the Council and this work needs to be completed at pace. The new framework will require the appropriate level of funding to ensure that it is effective.

There is not yet an effective line of sight to give leaders the day-to-day and thematic assurance that children are being safeguarded and that improvement work is progressing at pace with tangible results and impacts. This was an observation by Ofsted, and it now needs greater urgency on implementation. At the operational level, supervision and management oversight are poor; supervision frequencies do not meet policy requirements and the quality of supervision is not driving challenge and the delivery of improved outcomes for families. Management oversight is sporadic and recording of this is often poor, meaning that key decision-making can lack clarity and direction. Low levels of supervision often mean that there is a delay in case closure, and this can inflate caseload levels, where workers hold cases which have limited or no activity. There is a requirement for observations of practice, but it is not clear how frequently this takes place, and with what outcomes; further work needs to take place to formalise and capture this activity, then aggregate findings as part of the quality framework. An extension of the case audit function to all managers and leaders, including senior leadership, the Chief Executive and the Lead Member would significantly strengthen the line of sight, particularly if triangulated with engagement and co-production with children, young people and families, use of young inspectors and programmes of member visits to teams, projects and settings. This reliable direct knowledge would enhance scrutiny functions for members.

The Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Review in May 2022 recognised the need for further work on good governance for members and made recommendations regarding the need for greater scrutiny of plans at a Corporate and Administration level. Whilst an approach has been made to another Council to support this work, the implementation of the recommendations needs greater pace, including a mapping of the current governance structures within the Council and across partnerships and how they link along with respective role expectations. There are several 'scrutiny' arrangements which are not adequately embedded to offer effective challenge to senior officers or the partnerships, this needs to be strengthened as a matter of priority.

This work would ensure no overlap and duplication and a systemic whole system approach that links back to an overarching vision for partnership and Council. Regarding the Safeguarding Partnership, it is not clear that revised arrangements for the Safeguarding Scrutineer are delivering impact; there have been no published serious case reviews (SCR) since 2020, the latest annual report is still to be published and there has been no obvious scrutiny of the Improvement Board by the Scrutineer. The

partnership appears weak and lacks the gravitas to hold partners to account. A review of the existing arrangements needs to be undertaken as a matter of urgency to ensure the multi-agency oversight arrangements provides value and meets its statutory obligations.

Further work needs to take place to build effective strategic and operational partnership working. Progress is being made with joint working arrangements with police, though there are still some inconsistencies in practice as described above. Schools, colleges and health partners need to be included in implementing more effective and informed commissioning arrangements, including developing a children's Joint Strategic Needs Analysis (JSNA) and commissioning strategy.

Challenges remain in relation to how services are structured. One observation from Ofsted was how the Lead Professional role is underdeveloped, and although there is a good breadth of early help provision, it is not yet clear how effective these services are in preventing escalation of need into targeted and statutory services. The levels of Children in Need and Cared for Children per 10,000, which are well in excess of all comparators, suggest that there could be much better connectivity and targeting across services to achieve this. A key issue has been the fragmentation of services across the Council, leading to inconsistencies in thresholds and limited collective management oversight. Good work has taken place to realign youth offending and targeted services into the single Children's Services Directorate, but some services, such as Early Help, remain outside of this, and I believe this will continue to hamper progress in achieving streamlined integrated services which actively prevent the need for high-cost, low impact services. In discussion, some Early Help staff acknowledged things can be disjointed as they were not always 'in the loop' given that they sat outside children's services.

Partners would benefit from a systems analysis of the child's journey through services, understanding where communication, joint thresholds and workflow are most effective for families in improving outcomes, and for agencies in delivering value for money. Whilst there is a good breadth of early help services, and good library and leisure facilities clearly reaching out to families, a key area for exploration is the extent to which these effectively prevent the need for more targeted or statutory services, this is not yet explicit in the partnership's vision of the whole system.

The Improvement Board is starting to bring effective support and challenge, but this was much less visible prior to inspection. It is chaired by an experienced effective former DCS, but it needs refining to manageable level with tight targets and criteria to monitor and refocus on accountability across the partnership for delivery and impact.

The Improvement Plan is a work in progress, and intensive work is currently being undertaken to refine it. There are some strengths in this plan, it is a manageable length, and there is good grouping of thematic issues. There are some sound and timely actions around baselining, creating an agreed and unequivocal platform from which to chart progress. However, there are some issues of focus and granularity to consider. A key issue is that the plan does not yet create sufficient 'grip' in terms of driving pace and having effective tracking and reporting. Actions and outcomes are expressed in general

rather than specific terms, creating difficulty in pinpointing progress and lack of clarity about what can be expected as a result of actions, and when they can be signed off. There is a strong emphasis on compliance, and whilst this is important, especially at this phase of embedding the foundations of improvement, the plan needs much greater emphasis on quality of practice and intended outcomes for families, rather than outputs for agencies. The plan could be strengthened by setting out and promoting Sefton's vision for improvement, giving a clear message around improvement ambitions, timelines and the phasing around what is expected to be achieved by when. This will assist in managing expectations, driving pace and showing clarity around what has to happen in terms of foundation-building before partners can progress to broader ambitions. The plan in its current form does not yet do justice to the Council's clear ambitions around engagement, participation and co-production.

The critical piece of strategic work is to triangulate the Improvement plan with the practice improvement requirements and the governance and quality assurance arrangements, ensuring efficient cooperation across these three foundations of the improvement mechanism. All of this needs to be under the aegis of a wholly owned partnership vision for services to, and outcomes for, children, young people and families.

The Council is very open to support from other authorities and agencies, embracing Peer Review, formal support from Leeds City Council and other elements of support and advice from the sector but it needs to be more transparent and use its existing scrutiny arrangements more effectively and welcome challenge instead of taking a more cautious approach to openness and sharing performance. This growth in support has been organic, and the presence of multiple offers of advice and help can overwhelm leaders and operational staff both in terms of time required and in sometimes conflicting advice. This has meant that some recommendations, for example from the Peer Review have not yet been implemented, and leaders need time to consider which advice best meets Sefton's needs, and then the time to get on with implementing it. At this stage it would therefore be helpful to review the improvement support being offered and streamline this to a single suitably qualified and resourced sector led improvement partner (SLIP) or improvement partner arrangement with a strong council or trust alongside the Leeds City Council input.

Since 2016/17 the Children's Services budget for Social Care has increased in value from £32.5m to £52.069m in 2022/23. This reflects investment in the budget for commissioned accommodation and investment in staffing resources to support the service. Although additional resources have been made available to support improvement, this work now needs additional pace and rigour, and this will require further additional and recurrent resource beyond the original investment to secure sustainable improvement. The increase in financial investment was from a low baseline after austerity measures, and at a point where the service was already in embedded failure. The additional demands which have arisen through the pandemic, through local need and through ineffective systems are likely to further increase through current cost of living pressures and the legacy costs of demand arising from previous failure. It is my view that Children's Services are therefore exponentially disadvantaged in meeting the gap

between need and provision, with the additional opportunity costs of this intense improvement programme.

During the current year the Council has taken two further reports to its Cabinet and Council detailing the financial pressure within the service that has been caused by increases in agency staffing rates, the need to use 'managed teams' of social workers due to the lack of suitably skilled staff in the market (and in the agency market) and the significant increase in cost of individual accommodation that have been experienced since March 2022. This is estimated at nearly £10m and the Council has had to make difficult financial decisions including prioritisation and the one-off use of reserves to support a remedial plan. Also, within this current year, the Council reports that it has directed significant existing resources to work solely in support of Children's Services and its improvement- this financial cost covers dedicated support from communications, legal, finance, HR, Strategic Support with the project management and planning being undertaken by the Assistant Director for Strategic Support.

Whilst the Council is cognisant of the feedback from the Chair of the Improvement Board that 'good children's services deliver good value for money', it has expressed that no further flexibility remains and any further pressure will need to be met by reductions in other Council services.

Work is ongoing at present between the DCS and the Finance team on the financial resources that will be required in the next two financial years. Again, this is focused on investment in staffing via the Social Work Academy, budget requirement for agency staff and provision for further increases in the accommodation budget. This work is planned to be refined over the coming months in advance of the Medium-Term Financial Plan being presented in the autumn of 2022 in a context of there being no savings or efficiencies plans to be delivered by Children's Social Care during this 2-year period as opposed to the rest of the Council. This work would be enhanced by modelling the likely costs arising from legacy cases and the impact of the improvement work; for example, the likely recalibration of the system, with children moving to services which can effectively meet their needs and risks can in the short-term lead to an increase in costs. Typically, this might include more children moving into the care system, or moving from Child in Need to Child Protection plans. Likely increases in the care population in particular need to be modelled along with projections on the resulting increase in responsibilities around care experienced young people under the Leaving Care regulations.

Although the Council reflects that there is a demonstrable track record of the provision of additional investment to support the DCS as issues arise, the work to quantify the recurrent investment needs to be accelerated, to ensure more strategic medium-term approach to move away from high-cost low impact services, and to reduce the risk of a 'firefighting' approach. A timely determination of this will build confidence among stakeholders of a comprehensive approach to sustainable improvement. Without such investment, the Council will struggle to provide the improvement capacity required to address the very significant changes required. The Council reports that it would welcome further DfE financial support on both a revenue and capital basis.

In terms of current DfE support the Council is currently working with the Leeds Family Valued Programme and has been awarded over £3m to support this work and is receiving financial support from the DfE for its Social Work Academy. The Council, in addition to this Academy, is now actively progressing the evaluation of options for the provision of its own Children's Care homes within the borough and as part of the financial evaluation will also be developing bids for DfE funding to support capital and set up costs and initial operating costs.

The Council is also actively engaged with the department on current thinking around the future treatment of high needs deficits and is to start on the delivering better value programme. The treatment of the current deficit which is forecast to reach £15m at the end of the current financial year is being treated as a designated schools grant (DSG) issue and it is the clear view of the Council that this should remain the case as anything other than this will impact upon general fund financial planning. The Council clearly states that there are not reserves within the Council to meet this. The Council's engagement with both the Department and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has been proactive and has been welcomed by both departments in terms of supporting understanding of the issues faced by councils and the options that could be available.

Recommendations to Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council

1. A Commissioner should remain with oversight for the foreseeable future to ensure the pace and momentum is not lost and services fail to progress.
2. A medium-term financial plan should be developed which commits to recurrent additional investment for a three-to-five-year improvement programme.
3. Review the Council's market position within the region and sub-region regarding pay and benefits for new and existing staff.
4. Refresh the terms of reference and membership of the Improvement Board.
5. Develop a scheduled programme of review of progress at each stage of the improvement journey critical friend/peer review/Ofsted monitoring visits as a means of triangulating progress and reassuring leaders and citizens that progress is on track. Ensure that all forms of monitoring are reported through the Improvement Board.
6. Review and streamline improvement support to include an experienced sector led improvement partner (SLIP) or an improvement partner arrangement with a strong Council or Trust in addition to the Leeds City Council support.
7. Develop a cultural shift strategy throughout the Council to include internal communication, external communication and marketing plans.
8. The work to revise and triangulate the Improvement Plan, the performance and quality framework and the practice improvement programme should continue at pace, with each being completed and shared by the end of October 2022. This should include the publication of a fully owned Improvement Vision.
9. Review team and service planning so it makes a more coherent offer for staff.
10. Complete the shift in resources so that all relevant services are urgently co-located within CSD and urgently review the early help offer to ensure its preventative capacity is maximised.
11. Undertake a systems analysis of the child's journey through services, including modelling short- and medium-term financial implications of improvement.

12. Maintain a relentless focus on the quality of practice, including commissioning an immersive 12-month practice learning programme for all practitioners and managers and a programme of regular supported learning events.
13. As part of the practice learning programme, include comprehensive modules around supervision, decision-making and management oversight for managers, and secure places on national practice supervisors' training.
14. Demonstrate key evidence of political ownership of children's services i.e., fully articulated vision and profile of children's service is clearly set out in key Council and partnership strategic documents including Sefton 2030 and the children's JSNA and is clearly visible within their buildings.
15. Ensure that children and young people's voice, engagement and co-production with families is a central tenet of LA and partnership strategies, including Sefton 2030 and the Children's JSNA.
16. Safeguarding partnership to review any outstanding SCRs and LLRs and establish a timetable for completion and where appropriate, publication.
17. Safeguarding Partnership Scrutineer to prepare a report on work undertaken so far and its impact.
18. Map current governance arrangements for children's services across the partnership to ensure a whole-system 'golden thread' approach which prevents overlap and inconsistency.
19. Elected Members to receive additional training and support to ensure they know how to effectively discharge their duties supported by the LGA.
20. Ensure that the Corporate Parenting Board has representatives from across the political spectrum to ensure that responsibilities are everyone's business and consistency in compliance with statutory corporate parenting responsibilities and local standards as set out in the pledge.
21. Continue the work to develop local residential care provision and ensure sufficient investment to support this.

Paul Moffatt

Children's Commissioner for Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council



Department
for Education

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