

Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Children's Services and Safeguarding)	Date of Meeting:	Monday 6 March 2023
Subject:	Children's Services Improvement Programme		
Report of:	Executive Director of Children's Social Care and Education	Wards Affected:	(All Wards);
Portfolio:	Cabinet Member - Children's Social Care		
Is this a Key Decision:	N	Included in Forward Plan:	No
Exempt / Confidential Report:	N		

Summary:

The report updates on the progress against the Improvement Plan and provides an overview of quality assurance activity.

Recommendation(s):

- (1) Note the progress made and consider the priorities for the next quarter

Reasons for the Recommendation(s):

For members of the Committee to consider progress made to date.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected: (including any Risk Implications)

NA

What will it cost and how will it be financed?

(A) Revenue Costs

There are no direct revenue implications with this report. Members will be aware that there is significant financial pressure in the service within the current year in respect of agency costs and accommodation costs. Remedial action plans have been presented and approved by Cabinet and Council. Work will continue during the current year on budget monitoring within the service and any additional financial pressure or additional expenditure will need to be met from savings elsewhere within the Council. The Council's next three year Medium Term Financial Plan takes account of this Improvement Programme and the resources required to support it; this will be informed by the Executive Director of Children's Services.

(B) Capital Costs

There are no direct capital costs associated with the recommendations in this report.

Implications of the Proposals:

Resource Implications (Financial, IT, Staffing and Assets):	
Legal Implications:	
Equality Implications: There are no equality implications	
Climate Emergency Implications:	
The recommendations within this report will	
Have a positive impact	N
Have a neutral impact	Y
Have a negative impact	N
The Author has undertaken the Climate Emergency training for report authors	Y

Contribution to the Council's Core Purpose:

Protect the most vulnerable: The Improvement Programme seeks to deliver change across Children's Services whose activity protects and supports those children and young people who have complex care needs.
Facilitate confident and resilient communities: Children's Services work with partners to support families in need of support and improve resilience.
Commission, broker and provide core services: Children's Services work with partners to support families in need of support and improve resilience.
Place – leadership and influencer: The Council will take a lead role in work with partners to deliver change in Children's Services.
Drivers of change and reform: The Council will work with partners to deliver change in Children's Services.
Facilitate sustainable economic prosperity: NA
Greater income for social investment: NA
Cleaner Greener NA

What consultations have taken place on the proposals and when?**(A) Internal Consultations**

The Executive Director of Corporate Resources and Customer Services (FD.7153/23) and the Chief Legal and Democratic Officer (LD.5353/23.) have been consulted and any comments have been incorporated into the report.

(B) External Consultations

The Executive Director Children's Service and Education and his leadership team engage with partners across Sefton regarding the Improvement Programme. The voice of children, young people and their families will be integral to delivering change.

Contact Officer:	Joe Banham, Jan McMahon
Telephone Number:	Tel: 0151 934 4431
Email Address:	joe.banham@sefton.gov.uk, jan.mcmahon@sefton.gov.uk

Appendices:

The following appendices are attached to this report:

A Improvement Plan

B Youth Engagement toolkit

C Quality Assurance Framework

Background Papers:

1. Background

- 1.1 Phase 2 of the Children's Improvement Programme continues to comprise of four themes;
- Quality - Ensuring the right staff are in the right place at the right time to deliver a consistent standard of good quality safeguarding services to children and families.
 - Improving Implementation of Learning - Using what we know and learn to continuously improve and enhance the services we deliver for children and families.
 - Improving Tools - Ensuring we have the right tools to enable the workforce to deliver good quality services for children and families.
 - Improving Strategic Partnerships - Effective partnership working to enable the delivery of common goals and a high quality multi-agency response for children and families.
- 1.2 The Improvement Plan also now identifies four key areas that will be strengthened through the actions included; -
- Corporate Leadership
 - Governance & Partnerships
 - Practice
 - Enablers & Resources
- 1.3 The Improvement Plan at Annex A includes milestones and measures.
- 1.4 At the time of writing this report officers were preparing for the second Ofsted Monitoring Visit.

2. Progress

- 2.1 The Council will approve its 2023/24 budget at its Council meeting on Thursday 2 March 2023 and in addition to the approval of the 2023/24 budget the associated report provides the basis for the development of the 2024/25 budget.

A key recommendation from the Department for Education (DfE) Commissioner was to align the Medium-Term Financial Plan of the Council to the Improvement Plan that is in place within the service. The proposed budget includes a further investment of £17.9m into Children's Services during 2023/24 and this will take the annual budget to £70m. This budget has been developed by the Executive Director for Children's Services to align as stated with the Improvement Plan and needs of the service.

The Council is committed to improving services for children and further work will commence at the start of the new financial year on the longer term budget for the service taking into account a period of between three and five years as reflected in the DfE Commissioner's report.

- 2.2 A clear area of development within Sefton Children Services was the recognised gap in a performance culture. Senior managers, Service Managers and Team Managers were not relating key data to measure impact and address poor performance. Discussion with Team Managers highlighted the lack of understanding as to the application of performance and their view that data was unreliable. As part of the implementation of the new Quality Assurance Framework officers have now embedded monthly performance meetings, chaired by the AD of Safeguarding, with Service Managers. These meetings are an opportunity for areas of development and best practice to be highlighted and challenged.

Service Managers are now holding weekly performance meetings with all Team Managers to highlight areas of concerns such as visits to children or case supervision. These meetings are helping to address poor performance and we have seen some improvement in relation to areas such as assessment timescales, case summaries and case supervisions.

- 2.3 The Social Work Academy continues to develop and workers are benefiting from protected caseloads and weekly supervision. Weekly training is enhancing practice and this is evident in case audits which have highlighted areas of good practice.

The first strategic group has taken place with members from both internal and external bodies including Edge Hill University, Building Attachment and Bonds Service (BABS) and lead member for Children's Social Care. The Academy training will now start to proceed to new areas of training, learning how to undertake high quality assessments and working with children who are on a Child Protection Plan.

- 2.4 The Council is currently working with a recruitment agency to recruit twenty Social Workers from overseas. These workers will arrive from South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe where legislation is similar to that employed in this country. Interviews are scheduled for March 2023 with a planned arrival May 2023. The Council has obtained the necessary sponsorship visa for this undertaking and a programme of work is now underway to welcome and integrate the new arrivals in terms of practice and culture.

- 2.5 The Targeted Early Help Team and dedicated Family Time team (for supervised contacts) was implemented in Autumn 2022 and have been within the line management of Children's Services since their creation.

The Early Help Team (including Family Wellbeing Centres), Aiming High (short breaks team) and Youth Justice Team are in the process of transferring to Children's Services with a proposed transfer date of 7th April 2023 at the latest. Staff briefings have been held and a period of staff consultation is now underway and closes on 9th March 2023. Staff representations will then be considered and proposals will then be finalised following a report back to the Joint Trade Unions. Implementation of proposals will commence on 20th March 2023.

The proposal out for consultation with staff is around a straight 'lift and shift' of current staffing resource and associated line management into Children's Services, reporting into the Assistant Director (Help and Protection).

- 2.6 Two new teams will focus on specific areas of practice. The new Family Group Conferencing team will be working with families to achieve best outcomes and work restoratively to find family strengths and develop support networks. The My Space team, named by children and young will be tackling exploitation of young people and protecting them from harm.
- 2.7 Every day Social Workers deal with managing and mitigating risk. Ensuring that recording how workers have considered and plan to manage these risks is an essential part of work and there is a relentless focus on practice improvement. To support this, officers have introduced a generic risk assessment tool which is embedded within the Liquid Logic system. This risk assessment tool has been designed to ensure a standardised approach to undertaking risk assessments across the service and can be adapted for various scenarios when managing and mitigating risk.
- 2.8 Family Valued Model - The Team management training will begin on 6th March 2023 and aims to support a reflective change in how Team Managers work with both their staff and families.

The change workshops continue and officers have started to gain outcomes such as the "Outstanding Assessment grid" which will support the implementation of restorative approaches to assessment whilst ensuring best practice.

Representatives from Leeds are key members of the new Sefton Access to Resource and Care panel (SARC). This will allow live change in work with families in which children are on the edge of care through restorative practice.

- 2.9 Work has continued on the development of the Data Warehouse and Power BI. The Performance & Business Intelligence team are working closely with Children's Services to strengthen reporting and embed a performance culture across the service.
- 2.10 The Care Experienced financial offer has recently been revised following a review by the Making A Difference Group and is in the process of implementation.

To ensure a dedicated focus to children who are in Care Proceedings, two Court Teams have been established, this will ensure that children achieve their permanence plan at the earliest opportunity.

All children who are 16 now have a Personal Advisor who works with the social worker, to ensure a smooth transition into adulthood. The 'Next Steps' panel is a Multi-agency panel who review all children aged between 16-18 to ensure plans are in place.

Officers have strengthened oversight of our Cared For Children who are in unregulated homes, external accommodation and reviewing children's permanence plans.

- 2.11 A training programme for elected members is currently being developed by the Local Government Association (LGA). This package of training will begin to be delivered in March 2023. A more detailed report regarding member training appears elsewhere on the agenda.
- 2.12 As part of the Council's commitment to ensuring that children and young people's voice, engagement and co-production with families is a central tenet of Council and partnership strategies the Public Engagement & Consultation Framework has been refreshed and approved by January Council. The Youth Engagement toolkit, Annex B, has also been shared within the Council and with partners.
- 2.13 The Council recently made 'care experienced' a protected characteristic. In recognising 'care experienced' as a protected characteristic, the Council will actively seek out and listen to the voices of care experienced people in the same way they would ensure voices across the spectrum of age, gender, race and disability are heard. It will ensure that all decisions the Council make, the policies they set and the services they commission always consider the specific needs of care experienced young people and the impact on them.

3 Quality Assurance

- 3.1 Creating a learning and reflective environment that enables good practice to grow and innovation to flourish is key in delivering the required improvements. The Leadership Team want Practitioners to feel supported and part of the improvement journey. Members of the Committee will recall that a new Quality Assurance Framework (see Annex C) and Practice Standards were introduced during 2022. The Quality Assurance Framework is a living document and as learning is gathered the Framework is subject to review and update.
- 3.2 In June 2022 a cycle of monthly thematic audits was introduced which incorporate a practice conversation with the case holding Social Worker as well as the Independent Reviewing Officer/Child Protection Chair as necessary.
- 3.3 As part of this process the auditor seeks the views of each family receiving intervention. These enquires combined with a review of the file and appropriate moderation enabled a grade to be assigned to each case aligned with Ofsted descriptors.
- 3.4 This approach to audit is designed to provide a clear line of sight on practice quality whilst supporting a culture of learning and continuous improvement. This development is consistent with the recommendations of the recent Ofsted judgement.
- 3.5 Each month a different cohort of cases were audited with thematic findings combined with learning and actions on individual cases.
- 3.6 Although the focus of audits altered depending on the topic, each case audit looked at:
- General Recording
 - Assessment

- Plan and Review
- Oversight and supervision
- Multi-agency working
- Relationship based practice

Grades were arrived at through a review of the file, conversation with the case holding Social Worker and where possible the views of the family.

- 3.7 The most recent activity included 'deep dive' qualitative audits as well as a 'line of sight' exercise in respect of work within the 'Localities' Teams, within the Help and Protection Service.

In addition to the deep dive audit activity outlined above, a significant case review exercise is ongoing with approx. 100 families sat within the Localities service. These reviews are being carried out by the Assistant Director and Service Manager within the Safeguarding unit, strengthening senior management oversight in respect of approximately 250 children. Each review is entered onto the child's records and includes, if necessary, a list of actions which need to occur to in respect of work with the family, they also serve to highlight any areas of good practice. Team manager, Service Manager and the Assistant Director for Help and Protection as well as the IRO (if allocated) are informed of these reviews, and it has been stipulated that the review will be discussed at each allocated workers next supervision. As the reviews for each team are completed, a practice discussion takes place with the relevant team manager, highlighting any patterns or issues which have been identified. Each reviewed case will be returned to a month after the exercise has concluded to ensure follow up on actions. It is the intention to repeat the exercise throughout the service.

- 3.8 Initially the cases audited evidenced a lack of consistency in both compliance and quality in terms of recording practice. When these findings are triangulated with the results of conversations with Social Workers, Reviewing Officers and to a lesser extent families, it is clear that a large amount of positive social work undertaken with children and their families is not finding its way onto case records. This is not an unusual finding and is exacerbated when staffing pressures are an issue.

Audits throughout June, July and August identified the scope of challenge to practice across the service, they also highlighted a staff group who are able to talk confidently about their work and are committed to achieving change for children and families.

There is now evidence of some good cases been identified and, a number of 'good practice examples' were being identified within cases, these are examples of things such as strong assessments and positive elements of direct work. A record of these pieces of work is being kept in terms of a library of good practice and is also highlighted to practitioner and manager so that good work is celebrated. However we need to be aware that we need to evidence good cases for all families.

- 3.9 There are improvements to be made in respect of oversight and supervision across all areas of the service, although recent evidence and performance data is indicative of increased oversight and supervision.

- 3.10 All audits featured a practice conversation between case holding Social Worker and the auditor, a number also featured engagement between the auditor and the relevant IRO or CP chair. Practitioners report overwhelmingly on the positive nature of these conversations. Since the new QA framework was launched over 100 such conversations have taken place, supporting the embedding of a learning culture.
- 3.11 Families who have engaged in the audit process have to a large extent echoed this. The ability to achieve effective change in the lives of children and families is predicated on effective relationships. The ability to maintain these relationships is impacted by the turnover of social work staff and the resulting handover of cases from worker to another. In addition to these conversations a number of families have been spoken to as part of the audit process. It is of note that most of the comments both positive and negative either from the parents or young adults spoken to this quarter related to how well the Social Worker had communicated with them.
- 3.12 Quality assurance activity over the last seven months has strengthened the line of sight on practice and provided assurance that issues are not only known but have also been clearly communicated to all staff in the context of the Improvement Plan. It has also provided assurance that the improvement actions identified in the plan are targeted appropriately, including our work with Leeds which has been refocused to some extent to take account of our priority needs around recording, planning and assessment.
- 3.13 It is essential that the information obtained through audits is used to improve practice, either in terms of individual case actions, thematic learning or changes and adoptions to process. It is also vital that the effect of any improvements is measured and reviewed, for this reason a cycle of 'close the loop' audits will be carried out to ensure that improvement in specified areas is tracked. This process began in January 2023 to allow improvements to embed. It is anticipated that changes in process and improvements in practice will be evident as officers return to areas previously audited.
- 3.16 Recently a programme of intervention has been developed along with partners from Leeds focusing on the role of the first line Team Manager. This cohort of staff are crucial in gatekeeping quality of work, through oversight, supervision and the signing off of plans and assessments, in comparison to the front line Social Worker cohort they are also a more stable, permanent group of staff so intervention directed at them had more chance of embedding. This development programme will be mandatory for all Team Managers and consist of a number of sessions directed at practical elements of the first line management role, linking in with the newly refreshed practice and supervision standards.

4 Improvement Plan Priorities for the Next Quarter

- 4.1 Officers will continue with targeted recruitment for key vacancies across Children's Services. This will be supported by the new recruitment offer including the recently approved changes to mileage and retention payments.
- 4.2 Over the next quarter Officers will ensure that all partner agencies are aware of their responsibilities with regards to private fostering arrangements.

- 4.3 Work is underway to review partnership approach to the quality and amount of contacts being received by the Integrated Front Door.
- 4.4 Officers will maintain a relentless focus on practice improvement. Work with Leeds in regard to Team Management training and change groups with focus on practice improvements. Ongoing training within the Academy to ensure we are growing our own and working in a family led way.