

Councillor	COMMITTEE	DATE
Councillor Roscoe	Cabinet Member Children schools and families	12 November 2024

Introduction

After the tragic events in Southport, where children’s services in Sefton rallied round the community and provided support to children families and schools we are entering into a focused period of work rebuilding trust and community cohesion. Our Early Help transformation is progressing with services already being delivered in Family Hubs, with a plan for a celebration of this work (rather than a launch) to happen in the new year. In Children’s Social Care we are focusing relentlessly on practice improvement and are preparing with partners for an Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services, expected in the next six months. In Education, we are rolling out the team around the school initiative to the schools in Southport and working on the implementation of our updated Attendance Strategy. We are also preparing for a SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) inspection, which is likely to take place in 2025.

Children's Social Care

We know that Ofsted will be undertaking another full Inspection of Children’s Services within the next six months and have started a programme of inspection readiness in preparation for this.

Our Improvement plan was revised in Summer 2024, building on the work done since the original one was published in 2022. The actions from the revised plan have been separated into service plans for the areas of focus. We have also completed a diagnostic of progress since the ILACS and the subsequent monitoring visits, to track progress against the specific priority actions required by inspectors.

Our transformation plan will focus on wider systems improvement to provide a framework of support to practice – workforce development, partnerships, sufficiency, and commissioning. The children’s services transformation plan sits within and is supported by the corporate transformation plan, which sets a clear ambition to build on successes and remain focused on improving the lives of our residents.

What's Improving?

Early Help

We have implemented a transformation programme in Early Help, to ensure children and families who need support are able to access it at the right time. It was recognised by Ofsted in their last monitoring visit that children who need early help receive an effective and timely response from FAST. Newly developed Family Hubs are up and running, providing support for children and families in communities which are accessible. Services provided include: breast feeding support groups, baby clinics (with Health Visitors) benefits advice, careers advice for 16-18 year olds, talking therapies, Stay and Play, advice for parents of children with SEND, and family legal advice. A celebration of Family Hubs (rather than a launch) is being organized in the new year to celebrate the achievements of staff and parents, and to increase visibility and attendance.

Data, performance and quality assurance

With the help of strategic support colleagues, we have developed robust systems to monitor performance, against our key performance indicators, and in comparison with regional partners and statistical neighbours. This is allowing operational and strategic managers greater clarity regarding where we need to improve practice. We are also undertaking audits as part of our quality assurance framework to ensure practice is good enough. This informs our training and practice improvement programme. Audits show a steady improvement in the core practice we deliver to children and families since the ILACS in February 2022.

Achieving Permanence for our Cared for Children

We have done a huge amount of work to ensure that our cared for children are living in supportive, safe and secure families, whether this is with family members through special guardianship orders (SGOs) moving into adoptive families, living with foster carers in long term arrangements, or being reunified with parents, after a period of being cared for. Since the ILACS in 2022 we have also made significant improvements in our Fostering Team, to ensure cared for children are able to experience family life in households where their carers are experienced and supportive of their needs.

Springbrook

Our in-house respite provision for children with Complex Needs has recently been inspected by OFSTED. Although we are awaiting the formal reply from OFSTED we are happy with the findings which again highlight progress in this much needed service.

Corporate parenting

There has been considerable progress in increasing the responsibility of the council and wider partners as corporate parents, for our cared for children, and for care experienced young people (CEYP) who are on journeys to independence. An example of this is the work done with Housing colleagues to make the transition to living independently easier for CEYP. They have negotiated an agreement with the largest provider of social housing in Sefton that they will provide carpets, curtains and white goods for CEYP to ensure they can move in to their permanent housing smoothly and with a minimum of stress. The CEO of this housing provider now also attends the corporate parenting board. In terms of education, we are working with schools and colleges to maximise the support given to cared for and care experienced young people, to address barriers they may have to learning, with the assistance of our Virtual School.

Areas of concern?

Despite the progress being made, we know there are several areas where we need to focus our attention, to improve systems and practice, to provide better support for the vulnerable children we work with, many of whom have complex needs.

Workforce stability

We know there is still a relatively high number of social workers who are not part of our permanent workforce, but who are employed as agency workers. The percentage at the moment is 29%, and we have a target to reduce this to 20%. We know that social work recruitment is a highly competitive marketplace. Neighbouring local authorities are able to pay higher rates of pay and have better incentives, so we have instigated a programme of workforce development (see page 4) to ensure we give the best possible support to our social workers.

Practice in Help and Protection

We know there are high numbers of children subject to statutory social work interventions, and that the latest Ofsted monitoring visit, and our own deep dive audits and performance monitoring show that some areas of practice are poor. We have seen an increase in the number of children subject to child protection plans, and we know that there are some families where children have been on plans for longer than we would like. Some of these children have complex needs. There is a focused piece of activity scheduled to commence from November 2024 which involves a review of all children subject to a CP plan for over 12 months.

Partnership understanding of multi-agency safeguarding

We have completed some monitoring through audits of multi-agency safeguarding, which has highlighted some issues around understanding of what it means to effectively

safeguard children. This is particularly apparent when we are working with children subject to criminal and sexual exploitation, who are at risk, and cannot be supported through just one agency. As a result, we have commissioned an independent review of services, structure and practice to support improvements and this is being reviewed regularly by the 3 Key Safeguarding Leads.

Children with complex needs and disabilities

We have just completed a review of this service, and we know that there are various issues that need to be addressed, such as a backlog of assessments, the linking of Direct Payments to the needs of children, and a shortage of permanent staff. We are also going to look at the management structure of Springbrook, our residential provision for children with complex needs and disabilities and the prospect of increasing our in-house offer.

Care experienced young people with emotional wellbeing and mental health needs

We know that some of our care experienced young people who are experiencing problems with their mental health, but whose needs do not meet the threshold for a statutory intervention, can't always access support.

What are we doing about it?

Workforce development, which includes recruitment and retention of experienced social workers, is one of our Transformation Pillars. We aim to improve the numbers of permanent staff and decrease the turnover of social workers to provide stability for our children. A programme of work has already started which includes: Development of a workforce strategy and implementation plan to address the following:

- Recruitment & retention reducing the need for agency staff
- Organisational development to support best practice
- Culture change to create measurements for learning, professional trust, authenticity and curiosity

We have developed a programme of rapid improvement in Help and Protection. We developed an immediate response to the June Ofsted monitoring visit concerns: including better reporting of timeliness and effectiveness of meetings, and a programme of training, including safety planning training throughout the service.

We are about to start a three-month improvement project, which is being done jointly with the safeguarding unit, and supported by our practice improvement team, focusing on children who have been subject to Child Protection plans longer than 12 months. Panels will be put in place for focused practice improvement leading to improved outcomes for these vulnerable children.

We have also developed a learning and development accelerated response, delivering 'firm foundations' training on assessments, analysis, planning and management oversight and there will be a new service wide focus on Permanence, led by an Assistant Director in the New Year

In conjunction with Leeds, our sector led improvement partner (SLIP), we have had a development session looking at a medium term goal in supporting changes to the child protection conference structure, making it more strength based in approach and as a result more engaging and participative with families. A proposal has now been shared with the senior leadership team and agreed and will now go the Safeguarding Partnership for partnership approval. The intention will be to initiate an implementation process to ensure staff are engaged in the process.

In terms of multi-agency safeguarding, we are taking the learning and recommendations from the multi-agency audits back to our subgroups and the Safeguarding Forum, to ensure we can embed practice improvement.

The children with complex needs and disabilities team, under the direction of a new service manager is starting on a programme of improvement, whereby we will instigate amongst other things, more effective and timely assessments, and ensure a rolling programme of recruitment to ensure permanent staff.

To support Care Experienced young people with psychological wellbeing, a pilot spot purchase model has been agreed whilst the option to develop a broader localised model is explored. The agreed specification /model includes an assessment/triage, and 6 sessions provided by established voluntary, community or faith (VCF) providers. Additional sessions will be available if needed. This is a low level support offer, however, if clinical thresholds are met for commissioned adult MH services, then appropriate referrals would be made. It is hoped we will have the service offer fully mobilised and operational by the end of the year.