

Councillor	COMMITTEE	DATE
Diane Roscoe, elected member for children, families and schools	Overview and Scrutiny	15/01/25

Introduction

A policy statement from the Government ‘Keeping children safe, helping families thrive’ was launched in November 2024 which outlines the government’s commitment to keeping families together and children safe. It also outlines a commitment to support children to live in family settings where children cannot remain at home, including through kinship or foster care, rather than residential care. Alongside this, the statement sets out ambitions to fix the care market, and ensure the system is working effectively for vulnerable children and families. Legislation will be brought before parliament to enact the new approaches.¹

In Sefton we are analysing how the work we are already doing, and plan to do in the near future fits in with the new landscape, particular the delivery of a multi-agency child protection model through integrated multi-agency child protection teams, and a proposed new duty on safeguarding partners to ensure education is sufficiently involved in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

There will also be changes to parents’ rights to home educate their children, they will now have to have consent to do this from local authorities where there are safeguarding concerns.

In 2025 we are focused on our Southport recovery plan, our Early Help Transformation and roll out of Team around the School. We are also, along with our partners preparing for an Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services, a SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) inspection and also inspection of our Youth Justice Partnership.

Children's Social Care

We know that Ofsted will be undertaking another full Inspection of Children’s Services possibly within the next three months and our programme of inspection readiness is well underway, with engagement from our partners across health, the police and education.

¹ [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024-25 - House of Commons Library](#)

Our service managers have been analysing the expected key lines of enquiry, and we have produced briefings and action plans as a result, to improve practice and outcomes for children and families. We have also involved partners in the findings from key lines of enquiry, making sure there is a 'golden thread' of improvement actions.

Our Improvement plan was revised in Summer 2024, building on the work done since the original one was published in 2022. We continue to track our progress against the revised plan. The Commissioner Paul Boyce has reviewed our progress from March 2024 to October 2024 and his letter with recommendations to the Minister will soon be published.

What's Improving?

Early Help

The restructure of Early Help is almost complete and staff will be moving into posts in the New Year. The Family Hub Implementation is working well, and we are now starting a Comms campaign to help improve the number of families accessing the hubs. Evaluation of FAST and CHAT has shown a promising start with partners, agencies and families liking the conversation model.

A new emotional health and wellbeing board has been set up – Our emotional health and wellbeing strategy and service mapping is being updated to provide an accurate snapshot of services available. The new strategy will be published in 2025

The new Early Help strategy is in development - Peopletoo have finished the first draft, using up to date data from the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, outcomes of the most recent consultations, the most up to date governance arrangements, and the newly agreed Early Help Partnership priorities to update these sections.

Peopletoo are working to hand over the programme to our transformation team, which will lead into the next stage.

Data, Performance and Quality Assurance

Our weekly performance meetings enable managers and practitioners to plan ahead as well as report on progress. There is also monthly performance monitoring by the senior leadership team. This performance culture is more embedded and informing improvements. The Quality Assurance framework is embedded and focused on quality of practice. Moderation shows good quality audits, with 40% being moderated. The Principal Social Worker has also increased the frequency of action learning sets to monthly until July 2025 for Management Oversight and Supervision and has added an additional session in January 2025 to target managers where inadequate and requires improvement grades have been seen. Our Complaints service redesign has begun with consultation done with children and families.

Achieving Permanence for our Cared for Children

A Practice review of children on a Child in Need (CiN) plan for longer than 12 months has been completed. Panels have been set up chaired by Service Managers for focused practice improvement leading to improved outcomes for these vulnerable children.

CiN reviewing officers are implementing the practice improvement work with the social workers involved.

There is renewed focus on permanence, plans and planning for children on a Child Protection Plan longer than 12 months. A panel system ensures that outcomes for these children, who are some of the most vulnerable in Sefton are improved. We recognize that some of these families will need long term support, but many of them no longer need to be on a CP plan.

180 children have been permanently matched with their foster carers. In the last 6 months there have been no children on a care order placed at home. 52 children have exited through discharge of Care Order or special guardianship orders (SGOs) and a further 49 are in train.

Partnerships

The Safeguarding Partnership is maturing and now has the basic architecture to support multi agency work. It is more linked to practice. The subgroups – learning and development; policies and procedures; performance, quality assurance and data; harm outside the home; the integrated front door; and the practice review group are functioning well. Work between Leeds and Subgroup chairs is near completion – 10 sessions were commissioned in total. Positively, there is signs of strengthened relationships, connectivity between chairs has improved, alongside collaboration and effective communication – Notably, chairs have established a peer group.

Completion of our Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire which examines the emotional wellbeing of cared for children stands at 96% and an expedited process and extensive consultation enables our cared for children to gain support through CAMHS. A new mental health support service for care experienced young people has started with 6 weekly counselling sessions.

Cared for Children and Care Experienced Young People

There have been evident improvements in permanency planning and better use of kinship care and special guardianships. Visits to our young people, up to date

assessments, supervision and management oversight have all improved. The Hub has opened and is being well used. Young people can access a variety of services and support at the Hub, including Housing advice. Young people recently attended a Christmas Party at the hub where they played games, quizzes and bingo and received presents.

Team around the school

The Team around the school pilot is being evaluated from November 2024 but there have been some emerging successes reported.

- Improvement in attendance rates across all 5 clusters (improved by 1.5%)
- Reduction in numbers of open Early Help Assessments (reduced by 64)
- Improved engagement with families and children
- Families more willing to ask for help
- Improved working relationships across cluster schools and with professionals

Corporate parenting

The Corporate Parenting Board is maturing. Membership of the Board is under review to ensure that we have the correct people around the table.

Areas of concern and how we are addressing them

Despite the progress being made, we know that there is much more to be done in the lead up to inspections to be confident of an improved set of judgments and better outcomes for our young people.

Private Fostering.

Children who are privately fostered sometimes need support to ensure they have a safe and secure place to live. At present there are eight children who privately fostered. There have been instances where children who are privately fostered are not identified as such, and this has led to delays in assessment and support. We have developed a number of actions to ensure this is remedied, including monitoring children who are privately fostered through a weekly meeting and an action tracker so there is service manager oversight. They also sign off the assessments. We are also working with the Sefton Safeguarding Children Partnership to increase awareness amongst partner agencies of children who privately fostered.

Children with Complex Needs (disabled children)

A review of the service was undertaken in October, and an action plan is in place. We are aware that performance needs to improve in terms of timeliness of assessments, visits and management oversight. All new children with complex needs coming into the team, from early January 2025 will be assessed by the Immediate Response

assessment team. This will allow the CWCN team to focus on the specialised work needed and will include a re-assessment of a child's needs where this is overdue. A permanent service manager is due to start in January and there is a drive to achieve stability of social workers and team managers, plus the recruitment of additional family support workers in the interim.

Homeless 16 and 17 year olds

We have reviewed our joint protocol between Children's Social Care and Housing and recognise that we need to improve joint working. Most young people who are homeless or who become homeless will become cared for (accommodated under Section 20) However, Housing have provided assurances that they will commission provision for those young people who do not want to become cared for – this option has not always been available. We would like to jointly commission this with a registered provider, so no young person is left without accommodation in an emergency. Senior managers have reiterated the commitment for a Housing Officer and a social worker to meet and talk to the young person together and develop a clear pathway of accommodation and support according to the young person's wishes.

Education

This report will focus on what is working well and highlights any areas of concern in Education and Inclusion.

The full SEND dataset is available in a presentation to the committee.

Southport Recovery

Following the tragic events in Southport, external funding was sought to roll out expansion of Team around the School to all Southport Schools as soon as possible. Partners have been engaged and the guidance documentation updated. Head teachers and school staff attended a workshop in November supported by core members and successful clusters to highlight expectations and best practice. Recruitment is now underway for Social Workers, Early Help Workers, Team Manager which will determine implementation date)

School Improvement Autumn 2024 update January 2025

The team continues to fulfil the statutory duties to maintained schools, and this is enhanced by bespoke training packages and pilot schemes e.g., early writing, headteacher induction, aspiring leadership, assessment and headteacher recruitment. Due to additional capacity, the school improvement offer has been broadened to include

extra pre OFSTED support, governor training, headteacher performance management and leadership support. Targeted work continues beyond the schools causing concern offer to ensure we take both a preventative and responsive action.

School Improvement Post 16 work:

The team have supported the completion of Quality Assurance visits to all Alternative Education providers with a new schedule now planned for 2025. Training is also currently being rolled out to all schools and providers to implement the new 'DC Pro' system which is a tracking, attendance and outcomes, data base for all young people on Alternative Provision.

Post 16 participation rates are still the best in the City Region and above the Northwest and England average. The Activity Survey for last year's year 11 and 12 school leavers will be available in February. This will provide an analysis of all post 16 confirmed destinations into post 16 learning options, including comparisons to previous years data. There are currently some concerns about post 16 with the majority of places now filled and some courses oversubscribed. This will be raised with Ofsted at our termly meeting on the 4th February. Additional funding which was secured last year from the DFE has now been recommissioned to support the availability of provision for the current NEET cohort through and any young people who drop out of learning and require an alternative offer as part of the NEET Reduction and Early Intervention Service commissioned by Employment and Skills and delivered by Career Connect (CC).

Delivering Better Value/ Inclusion

What's working well

Overall, the programme continues to be on track. The Graduated Approach Launch, held in partnership with health, featured the launch of Speech and Language Team's (SALT) primary age toolkit and a preview of the secondary age toolkit, with 88 provisions in attendance. To further develop the toolkits and provision maps, schools were asked to express their interest in piloting the new Graduated Approach. 20 schools have showed an interest with 10 attending the pilot workshop. In addition, a parental toolkit will be further developed in collaboration with SPCF. Training will also be delivered to health and social care colleagues in the Graduated Approach and toolkit usage.

As part of the DBV we have worked with Gary Cunningham, who is CEO of the multi academy trust who operate the SEMH hub, to support the piloting of an SEMH outreach model. An expression of interest for the SEMH hub has been sent to schools, and the successful school will be selected by the end of January.

Areas of Concern

The High Needs budgets continue to be under extreme pressure due to increased demand for support. Like many local authorities, Sefton's High Needs budget is in deficit.

The SEMH outreach hub was due to commence in the Autumn Term, however due to delays in ensuring the legal processes were adhered to, this timescale has moved to Spring/Summer term

What we are doing about it

The current High Needs funding system requires a review, and we are looking at how we manage this, as capacity of the teams to ensure this is completed is a challenge.

Attendance

An updated Attendance Strategy has been written and disseminated to schools in Sefton in response to Government guidance: Working Together to Improve School Attendance ^[1], which became statutory in September 2024. This was initially produced in the wake of the pandemic and sets out a vision for effective school level policy and practice which incorporates partnership collaboration with the Local Authority and other partners where necessary. In Sefton, we have adopted an 'attendance is everyone's business' mindset. We know we cannot achieve our priorities without working together with our wider partners in Sefton and we recognise that each organisation is just one part of a whole system and that by working together we can make the best use of the resources available to provide support where it is most needed.

School attendance is a protective factor for our most vulnerable children and young people, for example as a safe haven from issues such as domestic abuse, or the risk of criminal exploitation. The longer children are away from school they become isolated, and it makes it much more difficult to re-integrate back into education. Schools provide the most regular and consistent point of contact for children and young people, and they enable their wellbeing and safety to be monitored, and early intervention to be put in place where necessary.

We have identified the following local priority areas for our Attendance Strategy:

1. We are in this together: Clear roles and responsibilities for all partners.
2. Clarity and consistency: Shared approach by all partners utilising the graduated response to attendance. The use of national attendance codes ensures consistent monitoring and understanding of attendance patterns, allowing for accurate data collection and analysis.
3. We recognise and support the most vulnerable: Severe absence and other cohorts.

4. We are responsive: Meeting need in the local context. Data can assist us in identifying early both individuals and cohorts across the Borough with emerging issues and concerns around attendance.

Our core offer to schools includes 'communication and advice' by regularly bringing schools together to communicate messages, provide advice and share best practice. Each school has been allocated a single point of contact from the School Attendance Support Team. They will also facilitate termly targeted support meetings where data will be utilised to identify individual pupils and cohorts at risk of poor attendance and agree targeted actions enabling access to multi-disciplinary support provided by early help workers to work intensively with the whole family. Where voluntary support has not been successful or engaged with and school attendance remains a concern, the team will take forward legal interventions (using the full range of parental responsibility measures).

Until 2021-22, Sefton's attendance data was published in arrears via census returns, with the council having no access to 'live' school data. Following the DfE attendance data pilot, Sefton has access to 'live' data from 100% schools via the DfE IDAMS system. This enables the Local Authority to make fully informed strategic decisions and provide leadership in attendance across the Borough.

All pupils who are SEND and have an Education Health and Care Plan who attend out of borough or independent provision are now monitored weekly and school attendance works jointly with the SEN team to address issues of poor school attendance. We have also developed an education working group with Sefton Youth Justice Team to look at improving attendance of those children involved in the criminal justice system and this has also been incorporated in the Integrated front door of social care where attendance is being identified at the point of entry into social care and monitored throughout the intervention alongside the Virtual School Deputy Head.

Emotionally Based School Avoidance co-produced guidance has been shared with schools and there have been training sessions with staff and parents.

The table below shows that there have been positive improvements in School Attendance.

Comparing the full academic year of 23/24 with the current academic year 24/25:

- Attendance for Primary Schools has increased by 0.8%.
- Attendance for Secondary Schools has increased by 2.0%.

	23/24 – Full Year	24/25 - So Far	Increase
Primary	94.1%	94.9%	+0.8%
Secondary	89.2%	91.2%	+2.0%

SEND

What's working well

An Interim Head of SEND has been appointed to implement development and improvements. In preparation for the imminent SEND Local Area Inspection an inspection readiness group has been established and is meeting weekly. The self-evaluation framework has been reviewed and is being reproduced in line with the Local Area Inspection framework. This work is ongoing, and the SEND and Inclusion team have been working with partner agencies to complete the SEF.

Timeliness for EHCPs continues to improve, the 20-week time frame in October was 68.5% and in November 58.6% and December 54.1%. The national compliance data is 50.3%. The SEND team finished the year 2024 at 48% compliance, which is a 6% increase on the year end for 2023.

As of 06/01/2025, there are 87 plans which are overdue, of which 38 have been drafted.

The SEND team are preparing for the 15th February and 31st March which are statutory deadlines for completing key transitions. This work involves allocating school places for all children transitioning from Early Years to Primary Education and Primary to Secondary Education, as well as Secondary into Post 16 and beyond.

What are the areas of concern

The number of EHCP assessments continues to increase and an average of 20 new assessments are agreed each week.

Appendix

Children's Social Care performance scorecard



Children's Social
Care Performance Scc

The SEND dataset is presented as a slide deck to this committee meeting.