

REPORT TO: Children, Young People and Families Policy and Performance Board

DATE: 11 September 2023

REPORTING OFFICER: Interim Executive Director: Childrens

PORTFOLIO: Children and Young People

SUBJECT: Overview of Children's Social Care

WARDS: Borough-wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To provide members with an update on Childrens Early Help and Social Care to address unresolved issues in performance, quality and practice.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That

- (1) Members receive the update; and
- (2) Members ask any questions about the implications of the update; and
- (3) Members are aware of the key challenges in children's social care and their implications for the Borough

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 Since the Ofsted Inspection known as ILACS (March 2020) there has been a continuous circle of priorities and plans, audits and reviews, two Ofsted Focus Visits including one which led to the issue of a DfE Improvement Notice (Jan 2022) and the creation of a Children's improvement Board.
- 3.2 Serial changes to senior staffing have introduced both turbulence and complexity. Covid contributed to the challenges faced by the service, as did rising numbers of cases coming through the Front Door. An increase in staffing levels, predominantly agency staff above establishment, helped mitigate rising caseloads to some degree but this created significant budget pressures. Placement costs for children and young people with complex needs have risen dramatically, both as a consequence of the lack of suitable placements regionally and nationally and due to the escalating degree of need presented by a small number of young people. Furthermore, the lack of educational provision for children and young people with SEND in the Borough adds transport cost pressures to the budget outturn as children travel out of Borough.
- 3.3 The turbulence associated with changes at senior level is stabilizing and the appointment of the new Director of Children Services, Zoe Fearon, who starts in late October provides the context for the creation of our twelve week priority plan. This plan focusses our work in ensuring that children of the

Borough are safe and that we know they are safe, distilled in three priorities:

see children, hear children, help children.

3.4 Twelve Week Priority Plan

The core focus of our work is to ensure that children known to us are seen appropriately have a robust plan that takes account of their circumstances, wishes and aspirations. Where work with children does not swiftly improve their outcomes, escalation is timely and proportionate. Partners contribute to direct work with children including as lead practitioner and children attend school regularly.

This focus leads to our Directorate priorities which frame the work of our teams. This priority plan is scheduled to produce rapid results and is focussed over a twelve week period, concluding week beginning 16 October.

Our intention is to build a collective, coherent and connected leadership system where we hold joint and collective responsibility for the ownership of work with and for children of the Borough

- Resources are shared across the system
- Communications provide clarity
- We seek and act on feedback from staff
- Ensure the golden thread is secure and that manager roles are clear; accountability is seen as positive predictor of improved outcomes
- Support and challenge managers to ensure front line staff meet the needs of the children on their caseloads so their outcomes improve
- Build relations across our partnerships to ensure that collectively we improve outcomes for children
- Raise the importance of school attendance across the Borough. Our teams have established their priorities and are working towards improvements that can be evidenced through a complementary performance framework which will be reported to the Childrens Improvement Board on 8 September.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 This planning framework has been shared with both the DfE and Ofsted and will be presented to the Childrens Improvement Board with Divisional Managers owning their elements of the plan.
- 4.2 The Plan will demonstrate Halton Borough Council's commitment to ensuring that children of the Borough are safe, and that we know they are safe and that the turbulence of the past is now firmly in the past.
- 4.3 Should Ofsted announce an inspection of children's services in Halton in the next 'window' that opens on Monday 4th September (and repeats every Monday through to the end of November) we have a position that will grow stronger and stronger as the weeks pass.

5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The financial burden of funding services for children over and above the councils allocated children's services budget is at the forefront of our thinking and the twelve week plan is designed to ensure only the right cases progress into the statutory service arena, that cases are discharged speedily where that is appropriate and that social worker caseloads reduce to allow the service to reduce its reliance on agency workers.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children and Young People in Halton

The focus of this report is designed to provide assurance that the needs of some of the most vulnerable children in our Borough are identified at the earliest opportunity, addressed swiftly and engagement with services ceases as soon as is appropriate.

6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

It is very difficult for children in need of help and protection to thrive in any educational setting or environment and it is incumbent on us all to ensure we discharge our corporate parenting duty to support them.

6.3 A Healthy Halton

None.

6.4 A Safer Halton

Children in need of help and protection have a right to expect that the council will do everything in its power to assure their safeguarding and support them to become productive members of our community. This report demonstrates or

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

None.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

- 7.1 The effectiveness of Halton's provision of children services is judged by Ofsted through the ILACS process – Inspection of Local Authority Children Services. Halton is due an ILACS wef 4 September.

- 7.2 Currently our provision is not where it needs to be which is why the twelve-week plan is so important in re-establishing our base line practice to ensure that the good practice that exists across the Borough grows and extends and provides a stable platform for the development of the good service we would all wish to see.

- 7.3 As in so many walks of life, timing is everything!

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

None.

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

None identified.

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

Ofsted Children's services inspection – March 2020

Ofsted Children's services focussed visit - October 2021

DfE Improvement Notice issued - 13 January 2022

Ofsted Children's services focussed visit - November 2022