

This Business Plan extract contains information in relation to the delivery of the Council's following strategic priority.

Children and Young People

Our overall aim is to support the development and learning of children and young people so they grow up feeling safe, secure, happy and healthy, and are ready to be Halton's present and Halton's future.

Key Developments

COVID-19

There is not a single area of local government that is not affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The need for updated information and support on how to tackle the 'new normal' was and still is understandably great. The Coronavirus Act 2020 was introduced to Parliament on Thursday 19th March 2020 and became law on Wednesday 25th March 2020. The Act has throughout the last year been a work in progress reacting to and changing at differing points of the pandemic with some points of legislation changing daily following the receipt of intelligence. It did as suspected at the onset have profound implications for social work practice, education provision, health provision and every other possible provision for service users.

COVID-19 has affected all aspects of the education sector and children's social care system and there are both short term impacts, such as the effects of school closures and exam cancellations, as well as longer-term implications particularly for the most vulnerable children. We have worked tirelessly with schools to keep them open and children and their families' safe and well through online and virtual contact and resources, as well as high priority home visits.

The period since 23 March 2020 has been one of great innovation. In remote education a wide range of approaches were developed, tested and refined. A number of different approaches were used by schools to continue their education and they learnt from experience and innovated, they took on board pupil and parent feedback and improved their provision as the weeks passed. Despite the challenges that came with remote learning such as keeping pupils motivated and engaged, organising structured remote teaching suitable for very young pupils or the more individualised planning for those children with Special Educational Need (SEND). Remote education has made a significant contribution to enabling students to continue to learn and progress, and to mitigating any widening of the attainment gap for the disadvantaged. Access to appropriate devices and connectivity is essential for technology-led approaches to remote education, securing access for all pupils was also a significant challenge in many contexts.

Nationally, there were reports of inadequate food parcels being received by some families of children on free school meals during the national lockdown. In partnership with schools, ensuring vulnerable pupils were provided with food parcels that were of

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a high standard, met nutritional needs and were enough for individuals and families was a top priority for Halton. It was challenging to switch from providing meals in school to delivering them remotely to families but, we did it.

Pupils up and down the country worked hard to prepare for their exams. Pupils will carry these qualifications with them for their entire lives and we understood their immense disappointment when the news broke that exams would be cancelled.

This has been a difficult time for children, young people and families. Developmental and behavioural issues can arise due to isolation or social distancing at key developmental milestones. Some children may react immediately, while others may show signs of difficulty later on. Increased stress, boredom, isolation from friends and changes in routine can lead to a change in their behaviours and their mental health needs. This will in turn cause added stress for parents and carers who are already dealing with the impact of isolation, home schooling and working from home or not working at all. The financial worries or perhaps the fear of domestic violence and their inability to escape from this as well as, the fear of becoming ill or losing loved ones, all of this will understandably reduce their resilience and ability to cope. Effective responses to mental health and wellbeing will be essential in order to sustain the measures necessary to contain the virus and aid recovery. Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and their families will continue to be a priority but this is a whole-system approach – no single agency can be left to address this by themselves; it needs input from all sectors. We have worked hard with the NHS, schools, and other agencies to support the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and families and will continue to do so as we enter different phases of the pandemic and recovery.

Children's safety amid these extra pressures on families with acts of abuse being more likely to go unseen "behind closed doors" during lockdown are a cause for concern. Reduced access to children being seen by other professionals meant a reduced surveillance system. The pandemic led to an increasing number of families facing exceptionally difficult circumstances, this can fuel harmful acts of abuse or neglect on children. We continue to do all we can to keep all children safe, and to support families with challenges exacerbated by the pandemic such as mental health issues, alcohol and substance misuse. As the impact of the pandemic becomes clearer, we expected to see a rise in referrals to children's social care and demand for wider children's support services from the new and unmet demand that built up during the pandemic.

The past year has shown us how much can change in a short space of time and there have been so many challenges in responding to the pandemic and our workforce have been absolutely brilliant in their response. They made their homes into their office and continued to deliver services and adapted to the 'new norm' finding new and innovative ways of getting the job done. Some of our workforce are required to work on the front line and their dedication in keeping children safe has been immeasurable.

Locally we applied our learning from the first wave and built our intelligence about the families who needed extra support for the lockdowns that followed. Each service made

their own adaptations some of which may be detailed in this Business Plan. The pandemic's impact will undoubtedly form the basis of numerous studies requested by Central Government and worldwide and, as more intelligence is gathered and published, the true impact of COVID-19 on children, young people and their families may not be known for a number of years.

Improving outcomes for children and young people through effective multi-agency early intervention

Children, Young People and Families Plan 2018-21

This is now into its final year. It is the main plan for all the Partners within the Halton Children's Trust, it is our collective ambition to put children and young people at the heart of what we do to ensure that their needs are understood and met, and that they have clear ways to hold us to account for our decisions aimed at improving the outcomes for every child and young person in Halton.

Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic Trust members agreed that the format and membership needed to be reviewed. The children and young people that drove the changes in December 2015 had moved on and the format wasn't working for the current group of young people, parents and carers and so their attendance had dropped off. Professionals also felt there was a lack of formal reporting and that the business elements were not being addressed. Overall it was felt that the Trust had lost its purpose, it had become an information sharing forum and it was felt that a review of arrangements would provide a clearer focus to drive developments.

Due to COVID-19 our plans to implement the new Trust structure were temporarily put on-hold, understandably Senior Leaders across partner agencies needed to focus on the consequences of COVID-19. In December 2020 the Trust came together and updates shared during the meeting evidenced that as Trust partners, we have strengthened our support of each other during the pandemic and have continued to work together very well.

It was agreed by members that the previous proposal was still viable and should progress. Whilst timescales were agreed we then entered a new national lockdown in 2021 and whilst we have got used to the new way of electronic working, it still poses issues for some of our children, young people, parents and carers, we will have to work at their pace and for those with additional needs, virtual working can still be problematic.

It is probable that the Children, Young People and Families Plan which is due for renewal from next year (2022) will be delayed. Whilst this is not ideal it may prove to be beneficial, the delay will allow for information and intelligence to be gathered about the true impact of COVID-19 which may only become more apparent as the nation starts to open up and a 'new normal' is defined. Our new Children, Young People and Families Plan can perhaps focus on the new phase of recovery as vaccines roll out and we learn to live with COVID-19 for the longer term without it dominating our lives.

Troubled Families – Supporting Families

The Troubled Families Programme was due to end in March 2020, however the ongoing evaluation evidenced the benefits of the programme so it continued into 2020-21. The Troubled Family Outcomes Plan provided a partnership-wide framework that stated the significant and sustainable outcome measures applicable to families identified for support. The plan covered 6 core areas of family factors and when there were at least 2 factors present suggested that an integrated approach would be beneficial and would be monitored by the programme. Families were prioritised on the basis that if there were multiple problems, they were most likely to benefit from an integrated, whole family approach, these are also families that are a high cost to the public purse.

The MHCLG (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) announced that for 2021-22 they want to take the Troubled Families Programme into a new phase, with a refreshed vision, strengthened objectives and an even stronger momentum to tackle barriers and create lasting change. Launching the next phase of the programme – Supporting Families – which will focus on building the resilience of vulnerable families, and on enabling system change locally and nationally. This means ensuring that every area has joined up, efficient local services, able to identify families in need and provide the right support at the right time.

The programme, previously named the ‘Troubled Families programme,’ will now be known as ‘Supporting Families’, to better reflect the role that keyworkers play.

For the next phase, MHCLG committed £165 million funding for Local Authorities to help families with multiple complex problems to overcome difficulties as early as possible. It has acknowledged that local authorities are still responding to the additional needs created by the COVID- 19 pandemic, so to assist with stability, the MHCLG are using 2021-22 as a transition year to co-design, test, and iterate future improvements to the programme. The funding model will still be payment by results which will look for individual and family led outcomes.

For Halton the commitment is still the same supporting vulnerable families via whole family support from a lead professional where families are experiencing multiple complex problems. The partnership will continue to identify families in need of extra help, target services more effectively and track family level outcomes over the long term.

Halton will be taking steps forward to ensure we integrate and transform local public services to embed whole family working using the Early Help System Guide to inform the development, refinement and implementation of a new Early Help strategy. Work around the strategy will start in summer 2021. This will enable Halton to fully embed preventative approaches into our support systems for families, creating more resilient communities for the long term.

Ofsted Inspection Local Authority Children Services (ILACS)

In January 2018, a new universal inspection framework came into force. Driving improvement and catching LAs before they fall are the underpinning principles of the new framework, it is described as a system rather than a programme of inspection. The ‘Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services’ (ILACS) attempts to take a proportionate, whole system approach that is less intensive than the single inspection framework (SIF).

In addition to on-site inspection activity, this new way of working is supported and informed by an annual self-evaluation, the annual conversation as well as Ofsted’s LA intelligence system. Due to COVID-19 our annual conversation was delayed and took place on 1st April 2021.

Ofsted announced an ILACS inspection of Halton Children Services on Monday 24th February 2020, this covered a three week period with the inspectors arriving on site in week two, with the final day of the inspection being Friday 13th March 2020. The final judgement was published on Ofsted’s website on the 13th May 2020. The judgement can be one of three; Outstanding, Requires improvement to be good or Inadequate, Halton’s judgement was:

| Judgement | Grade |
|--|---------------------------------|
| The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families | Requires improvement to be good |
| The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection | Requires improvement to be good |
| The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers | Requires improvement to be good |
| Overall effectiveness | Requires improvement to be good |

As with every inspection we get an oversight into our strengths and areas for development but the main message from Ofsted was that they found that no children or young people were left at significant harm. They wanted to thank staff for being open, engaging and willing to talk about the work they were doing. They recognised that this helped them understand the experiences of children and young people accessing our services. They remarked that staff know the children, young people that they work with well and that they are enthusiastic in wanting to improve their life chances.

Immediately upon Ofsted leaving us, the impact of COVID-19 was becoming apparent and understandably this became our focus with immeasurable stress placed on our service however, once the final judgement was known we drafted an action plan which formed the basis of our work going forward in 2020-21.

Local safeguarding arrangements - Halton Children and Young People's Partnership

In June 2018, the government announced that all local authorities would need to make arrangements to replace their Local Safeguarding Children Boards by September 2019. Instead of each locality having access to a Local Safeguarding Children Board, the government wanted each locality to have access to a team of Safeguarding Partners, who will work collaboratively to strengthen the child protection and safeguarding system. Halton Children and Young People's Partnership (HCYPSP) was launched in July 2019.

The Safeguarding Partners are a team of key professionals from three sectors: the local authority; the clinical commissioning group for any area that falls under the local authority; and the chief officer of police for any area that falls under the local authority.

Together, these Safeguarding Partners are in charge of agreeing on and implementing new safeguarding strategies that will strengthen their multi-agency working and, in turn, improve the provision of safeguarding and child protection arrangements in the local area. In order to achieve this, the Safeguarding Partners set out how they will work together with all relevant agencies and make clear their arrangements for conducting local reviews.

The arrangements were developed as a result of wide ranging consultations with partners and community representatives. There are two main groups, the Safeguarding Practice Group and the Contextual Safeguarding Strategic Group.

During COVID-19 Safeguarding partners initially met weekly and then monthly to review the impact of the partnership approach and share service information and priorities and areas of concern. The sub groups and the Executive were re-established by August 2020 to work in the priorities set by the Executive. Rapid Reviews were also held as required.

Safeguarding Multi-Agency Practice Group have revised the threshold document and devised an easy to use guide to assist professionals and internal staff, this will be rolled out across the partnership. This Group is also working on embedding tools across the Partnership in 2021-22.

A structured multi-agency audit cycle is in place by the Safeguarding Partnership. Practice issues and themes identified in practice audits are tracked in the learning and improvement log by the Safeguarding Practice Group and have informed the re-launched Working Together training.

We are currently scrutinising the effectiveness of local arrangements. In order to provide the required degree of independent scrutiny, the Safeguarding Partnership have commissioned an independent consultant to review the effectiveness of the partnership and to complete the Annual Report.

iCART

Halton's multi-agency Integrated Contact and Referral Team (iCART) has been operational since 2016 and is the single point of entry for contacts and referrals in respect of children and families in need of early help and safeguarding concerns regarding children, young people and their families. Members of the public and practitioners can request early intervention support and raise concerns about the welfare of children through this team.

The team includes a wide range of multi-agency partners who are co-located, including Social Care, Early Intervention, Family Work, Education, Police, Health and support staff. CAMHS provide and have a point of contact for case discussions and the Education representative offers case consultation with schools, providing advice, support and guidance and signposting to appropriate services.

A robust performance framework is in place and a range of performance reports are available to the team and managers to inform the direction and planning of the service. Weekly performance reports provided senior management oversight to identify trends to ensure effective responses where necessary. Since the pandemic and subsequent lockdown in March 2020, there has been fluctuation within the rates of contact and referrals screened in iCART. Between March 2020 and January 2021 in comparison for the same period last year:

- 7644 contacts were received, a decrease of 295 = 3.9%
- 1252 referrals were received, a decrease of 229 = 15%.

When the schools returned in September 2020 children became more visible in the community and so the number of contacts increased. During September to November 2020 there was a 25% increase in contacts compared to the same period in the last reporting year.

November 2020 saw the highest number of referrals peaking at 160, the highest monthly figure for 12 months and again, 25% higher than same period last year. Early indications in the first week of return in March 2021 is of a similar pattern of increase in contacts and referrals. Police were highest referral source (344) with a peak in June, August and September 2020. There were 349 Domestic Abuse referrals March 2020 to January 2021 with March, June and November showing the highest figures.

An Assessment Toolkit was created for use across the Partnership, to support Professionals to work through concerns and provide rationale and evidence to subsequent decision making, with particular focus on the impact on the child. The Toolkit was developed during COVID-19 to support surge planning and resolve some confusion between existing tools. Training and consultations were provided for all School and Health providers virtually. This has improved the quality of information, timeliness and effectiveness, particularly from schools, less so health but further work is planned to embed this.

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Ofsted undertook a focused visit of the front door in July 2018 that was a positive assessment of the effectiveness of the service. 3 recommendations were made all were actioned. A Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) visit in June 2019, examining the multi-agency response to children experiencing or at risk of exploitation, including sexual and criminal exploitation, this highlighted a number of strengths across the partnership as well as a number of areas for development.

In March 2020 Ofsted Inspection of Local Authorities children's Services (ILACS) found; **"The application of thresholds in the integrated contact and referral team (iCART) is not always consistent, and the need to seek or dispense with parental consent is not fully understood or recorded"**.

Processes have been reviewed, to ensure contacts/referrals have Social Care Management oversight and there is a rationale recorded as to the 'level of need'. We are assured this is happening through Contact Challenge Meetings and weekly Principal Management case reviews.

As part of the Ofsted action plan the Quality Assurance Framework was reviewed and the Audit Framework was revised to include regular Audit of the front door activity. ICART Case Audits are now undertaken on a monthly basis – the findings are recorded to inform future developments of the service and to review threshold.

We have addressed the issue of consent identified by Ofsted, referrals for Early Intervention are returned if information is shared without consent and these decisions are now recorded more consistently.

Duty and Assessment Team (DAT)

A pilot Duty and Assessment Team (DAT) was created temporarily from 10th August 2020 in response to Halton's Ofsted inspection, to respond to increasing demand in the Child in Need (CIN) teams and, to respond to the demand modelling which predicted an increase in referrals as a result of the impact of COVID-19. It was also considered that this would support the restructuring of the CIN teams. This enabled us to effectively manage the predicted surge of referrals received in September and October and has enabled us to improve the quality and timeliness of assessments and planning for children. The Duty and Assessment Team consists of a 1 Principal Manager, 1 Practice Lead and 6 Social Workers.

Once iCART have screened the referral it is passed to DAT. Over a 6 month period this team commenced 728 Assessments, at the time of writing 592 had been completed with 136 ongoing. Of those assessments completed 90% were in timescale – that is, 10% higher than our statistical neighbours and 10% higher than England. The average duration of a completed assessment is 30 working days.

The team have been responsible for undertaking Multi-agency Strategy Meetings, Section 47 investigations and the Single Assessment under the Framework for Assessment on new cases being referred into the Local Authority, assessing children who are in need and in need of protection.

The creation albeit temporarily has been successful in reducing the pressure within the Child in Need Teams, enabling the progression of existing plans and interventions. This capacity also enabled an increase in management support and oversight with Principal Managers reporting that the DAT has had a positive impact on staff welfare and staff development and we are achieving better outcomes for children and families. It is evident there has been an improvement in practice, both in terms of the timeliness and quality of assessments, this is evidenced through the quality of cases presenting to initial Child Protection Conference and Legal Advice Meetings, being heard at the appropriate time with clearer focused plans derived from improved assessments. Feedback from partner agencies has been positive, they feel the team has more time to focus on the period of assessment; and the process is more inclusive, allowing partners to collaborate and contribute; they also feel communication overall has improved. The temporary Duty and Assessment has proven to be a positive addition, it is proposed, in the draft restructure that this function and structure will become permanent.

New cases following the Single Assessment are transferred from DAT to the CIN team or stepped down to Early Help Services to provide support and statutory services to children and families in need or in need of protection.

Children in Need

CIN/Child Protection Service works with families to provide ongoing support/intervention to children in need, child protection, public law outline cases and care proceedings. There are 2 teams serving Runcorn and Widnes separately and they were based on the side of the bridge they served but the service have moved onto one site in Runcorn with a view to integrating into a borough wide service in 2021. A business case has been submitted in order to progress restructuring the CIN Teams to ensure we embed systemic practice and to include the Duty and Assessment function as part of the permanent structure. Consultation with staff will begin in May 2021 with the expectation that the new CIN service structure will be implemented from September 2021.

In March 2020 Ofsted Inspection of Local Authorities children's Services (ILACS) found;
“Some plans are overly focused on adults. This means that actions to address risk and improve children's circumstances are not always as effective as they could be or completed in a timely way”.

There were plans that were too parent focused that did not always identify clearly what needed to be done, they lacked analysis and did not evidence the child's lived experience which impacts on the quality of subsequent plans. We have issued reviewed assessment guidance and introduced a new template for Child in Need and Child Protection Plans accompanied with improved management support and oversight at all levels. There is improvement in managers challenging the quality of assessments and plans, this is evident on children's files. Dip samples of plans produced in child protection conference during October 2020 identified an improvement in quality. They

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are more child focused, include outcomes for the child, and contingency plans are included, there are examples of the latter beginning to become more specific to the individual child/family.

In Halton, the current rate of children in need per 10,000, circa 93 is approximately the same as it was at the start of “lockdown”. During the period between June 20 and October 20, there was a reduction in numbers, this corresponded with a reduction in referrals during this time, and there was also targeted activity addressing drift and delay in Child in Need cases. The increase correlates with the increase in referrals when the majority of key universal services resumed, consequently a different trend to previous years.

Neglect remains prevalent in Halton, as the ILACS Inspection identified in March 2020:-
“Some children remain living in situations of chronic neglect for too long before decisive action is taken”.

Although there has been some improvement in this area, audit data shows there still remains drift in the planning for some children, and that managers and Independent Reviewing Managers (IRM’s) have not always robustly challenged or escalated. The dispute resolution process for the IRM’s has been reviewed and rolled out to ensure every manager understands their role within this. This has resulted in increased escalation and challenge and positive change for some children, however, there remains some inconsistency within the IRM team and this is a current focus for improvement.

As part of our reviewed quality assurance framework and performance management meetings, managers are scrutinising re-referrals to CIN/CP Teams, the purpose of this is to identify themes and issues, such as, over-optimism when the case had previously stepped down. They are also quality assuring cases identified for closure to ensure the case is not being closed too early, before evidencing sustained change. Quality Assurance and Audit will evidence families are offered appropriate services at the correct level and will evidence improvements in reflecting and recording the needs and views of children and young people in assessment and planning.

Activity between April 2020 to February 2021 evidences we are addressing drift and delay of cases in pre-proceedings and those subject to lengthy CP Plans. We are identifying cases at an earlier stage, for example, the number of pre-birth that have entered pre-proceedings and the number presented due to neglect. The Halton Children and Young People’s Partnership are also developing a 3 year Neglect Strategy to be rolled out in 2021. The strategy is being informed by Halton young people, and they are co-producing all of the awareness raising material.

Private fostering, the ILACS Inspection identified in March 2020:-
“Private fostering is not well understood. Children living in these arrangements are not promptly identified in order to ensure that their needs are assessed and they are effectively safeguarded in a timely way”.

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Children are assessed and supported under Private Fostering Arrangements through Child in Need Plans which are overseen by an Independent Review Manager based in the Safeguarding Unit however, the number of young people identified as living in these arrangements remains low, this may be due to lack of understanding or awareness and so may not be a true reflection of this cohort. A Principal Manager within the CIN Teams now has lead responsibility for Private Fostering with public information having been reviewed and updated, there will be further activity to promote and raise awareness with partners and schools.

The March 2020 ILACS inspection reported:-

“There is not a consistently robust response to 16- 17-year-olds presenting as homeless. Assessments of need are not sufficiently comprehensive”.

A Principal Manager within the CIN Teams has been appointed to take lead responsibility for Homeless 16/17 year olds to ensure the workforce correctly identify when a joint assessment with Housing is required and that they consider vulnerability as part of their assessments. This role has improved effectiveness of multi-agency working and the duty to prevent homelessness is being adhered to with resources available to be accessed at the earliest opportunity. Meetings have been held to review the current joint protocol, which is on track for completion by May 2021. We are currently developing and increasing our provision with regards to supportive lodgings. A number of supportive lodgings providers have been recruited.

Halton is committed to embedding a Systemic Model of Practice. Systemic practice promotes the belief that families and people have the capacity to change in the majority of cases, it ensures that problems are seen to exist within relationships, rather than with an individual, and are sat within a wider family context. This practice aims to look at not only the person, but also what surrounds them, their family, community and wider society. This allows a better understanding of what makes someone who they are, and what makes them unique to their own situation looking at all of the components which make up a person’s identity, for example age, class, race and education level. All of these characteristics allow us to gain a better understanding of that person and how we can best support them.

Children in Care

Children in Care and Care Leavers including fostering is a borough wide team. This service area has had a secure and strong leadership for over 18 months and has undergone a comprehensive review of its structures, staffing, performance management and engagement with children and young people. The significant statutory obligations placed on Local Authorities under the Children and Social Work Act 2017 placed additional stress on resources with Local Authorities to provide support to any care leaver (up until the age of 25) who requests it, including the provision of a personal adviser, assessment of needs, preparation of a pathway plan, and the provision of any support identified in that plan to be appropriate. The numbers

of care leavers had increased which led to a restructure and an increased number of Personal Advisors.

We want to develop the newly created and fully staffed Leaving Care Service, through a revision of the service development plan and provide more focused training specific for the Personal Assistants in respect of quality of practice, recording and compliance in completing pathway plans in the young person's timeline of review.

Children in care and care leavers have been supported in respect of their emotional health and wellbeing through a commissioned service. The emotional well-being panel ensures the provision of a high- quality, multi-agency approach for a range of mental health support and interventions including face to face and virtual sessions monitored through monthly allocation and tracker meetings. This has been a critical resource given the impact of the pandemic on our most vulnerable, particularly for some of our older children in care and care leavers, whose mental health has deteriorated. 168 children in care and care leavers have been referred for a serve since the commencement of the pandemic in March 2020.

Our Children in Care Council remains very active, they attended a question and challenge session with the Children in Care Partnership Board, designed a survey on service delivery which incorporated dealing with COVID-19, seeking views on services delivered, what we could do differently to improve their experiences and communications around statutory visits, reviews and contact. 75% of the respondents were living in foster care, while the remainder lived with family or in semi-independent living. We aim to develop joint owned service development plan, whilst delivering training to grow our current cohort of young inspectors to double its current number.

The ILACS Inspection identified in March 2020:

“Some children have to wait too long to be matched with foster carers. As a result, a few of these children are experiencing ongoing insecurity and anxiety about their future care”.

“Placement choice remains limited, and, as a result, a small number of children have been placed in unregistered settings”.

“The commissioning arrangements for these placements have not been sufficiently robust to ensure quality in all cases”.

The Permanency Planning Framework is operational in respect of reviewing placements for children and young people, through the Residential to Foster Care project. There are two areas of focus 1) those children in residential care with a plan to return to a fostering family placement; and 2) those young people aged 16 and over who require pathway and transition planning through to full independence. These children and young people are discussed in the operational group chaired by the Divisional Manager on a monthly basis with actions and plans being progressed.

Monthly tracking meetings continue to be embedded into practice to ensure that delays are addressed and permanence decisions for children in long-term foster care

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are made within children's timescales. Children are presented to Fostering Panel with a view to their placement being long term with the progress of matching also being tracked.

Children and young people, where a plan for a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) is being considered or pursued are subject to monthly review and their cases tracked to avoid drift and delay. Legal advice meetings are completed in respect of those children whose foster carers have expressed a wish to apply for an SGO for the child to be placed with them. Our longer term strategy is to continue to review to those children who are matched long term to identify if a plan of SGO would be achievable.

We identified that achieving a plan of adoption for some children was pursued for too long, and alternative plans for permanency at an earlier review point needed to be considered. To address this, revised practice standards were introduced, including explicit timescales to actively explore alternative plans. Permanency through adoption is done with Together for Adoption at monthly meeting and reviews of cases take place.

Halton commissioned training delivered across the Liverpool City Region (LCR) in November 2020 to focus on the content and quality of placement referrals for children. Improved quality of referrals to the placements team is evident and there are a number of follow up sessions arranged. The LCR collaboration on the commissioning of good quality placements, the specification sets out the requirements of both Residential Children's Homes and Fostering placements commissioned through the now established LCR Partner Provider Agreement (PPA).

We have strengthened the care leavers accommodation group (CLAG) with private and registered landlords joining the meeting as active members. This group provides scrutiny and oversight to all referrals, timeliness of accommodation and robust tracking of all cases. Through CLAG, we have successfully moved young people into suitable accommodation. The CLAG received an invite from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping directorate to share evidence of our effective practice. We will review the Joint Housing protocol and amend the CLAG Terms of reference to further support the scrutiny of sufficiency in relation to suitable accommodation and agencies roles and responsibilities as members of the group.

The revised and re-launched Supported Accommodation policy and procedure has been successful, resulting in a number of applicants in assessment to increase sufficiency and choice for Care leavers.

We continue with being innovative implementing a new 'supported lodging' scheme is aimed at providing a higher quality of support for young care leavers. The 'Take on 21' programme, which differs from fostering, as it allows people to work full-time and there is no age limit on who can take part increases the supply of quality of care for young people at a quarter of the cost' and a rigorous recruitment process ensures placements are safe and training is provided.

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We aim to review and develop our Transition to adult services policy and pathway to enhance smoother and coordinated continuation of services for those care leavers identified as requiring a service from adult's services.

Halton has taken part in a project run by What Works for Children's Social Care to promote higher and further education to our young people in Year 12 and Year 13. This involves sending each identified young person a letter written by a care leaver who is in further or higher education to encourage them to think about applying. There were two phases for the letters sent out – first set in December 2020 and the second set of follow up letters in March 2021. A web site with videos of students who are care experienced talking about their experience of further or higher education and the support available. The purpose of this was to show young people in care that there are people from similar backgrounds who have gone on to successfully apply and enter into higher or further education. In this way, the students in the videos act as role models and can be a source of inspiration.

Virtual School

The relationship with the Virtual School continues to be strong and adds additional scrutiny, they have ensured 'business as usual' for our children in care and care leavers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic adapting to the current situation and guidance and being proactive in encouraging all our children and young people to access school. The service played an active role in the multi-agency risk assessments, including doing daily attendance checks and keeping in touch calls as well as responding to individual issues often resulting in supporting the transition of the child or young person back into education. The Virtual School worked towards ensuring that our children and young people were accessing all appropriate support to mitigate against the impact of this disruption and lost learning.

In Lockdown 1, in response to the suspension of the national curriculum and formal teaching, the Virtual School devised a new PEP (Personal Education Plan). The PEPs successfully moved to a virtual format and provided a clear mechanism to address any concerns foster carers had in supporting children and young people with their education at home and in reducing anxieties around returning to school. Whilst the quality of PEPs has remained a focus, the adaptation of the spring and summer PEP made it impossible to do a year on year comparison.

Pre-COVID, attendance was 92% autumn term 2019 and 91% spring term 2020 pre-lockdown 1. In line with guidance and risk assessments the overall attendance of children in care was 73.5% during Lockdown 1 and was 70.8% during the period of wider opening in the summer term 2020. The main reasons for non-attendance were due to COVID-19 anxiety related issues and feedback from children and carers that due to the reduced offer some schools had to provide there was a higher level of engagement in learning at home. When children were not attending school, the Virtual School ensured that schools were providing work and supported carers with additional resources and access to on line learning ensuring that as many children and young

people in care as possible were provided with a Department of Education (DfE) laptop and router as required.

The Virtual School successfully launched Anspear, a training platform providing education resources for our foster carers to improve educational outcomes for children in care and care leavers. They also provided educational and fun activity packs to all our children in care throughout the summer and over the Easter break. The co working and targeted support by social workers and the virtual school was intrinsic in supporting children back to school in the September 2020 term. In October 2020 the Progress Improvement Clinics recommenced chaired by the DCS. The initial cohort of children were chosen from primary and secondary education They were chosen due to an identified need to improve the outcomes and address additional influencing factors that are impacting on their progress. These clinics will continue.

Whilst no individual judgement is given for the Virtual School, feedback from the ILACS inspection stated that the overall work of the Virtual School was good, there was a strong and positive team with good communication links to multi-agencies, and it is held in high regard by schools both within Halton and also out of borough. The inspectors also stated that the Virtual School had an accurate picture of its strengths and areas of improvement and outlined the same areas of focus as had already been identified by the Virtual School itself – improving outcomes for Key Stage 4 young people, improving Maths in line with the borough wide priority, and improving apprenticeship opportunities. The inspection also highlighted the need for more consistency in the quality of Personal Education Plans (PEPs) beyond the Primary phase, which the Virtual School had already recognised and has plans in place to drive forward.

In response to the inspection feedback, the Virtual School has increased its capacity with the appointment of 2 post 16 workers, one focusing on improving the completion and quality of Post 16 PEPs and support for our post 16 learners, and one focusing on employability including driving forward increased opportunities for traineeships and apprenticeships. An Early Years worker has also been appointed to drive improvements in Early Years PEP completion and quality and support for our Early Years learners to improve our GLD (Good level of development) outcomes. The inspection also made reference to new initiatives that had been implemented to improve the educational outcomes and these have continued, albeit adapted to reflect the current situation. New programmes have been provided through What Works for Children's Social Care such as Third Space Learning to improve Maths outcomes, the Family Skills Programme targeting learning at home for Reception children, and the raising aspiration programme for Care Leavers, Springboard.

Early Intervention / Team Around the Family

The Team around the Family service provides an integrated response across children centres, day care, and early intervention supporting multi-agency Level 2 work (including disabled children). It also takes the lead in coordinating and delivering parenting support and has recently taken responsibility for targeted youth support. The

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recent Ofsted report noted Early Help and the range of services was good nevertheless, despite LA budget pressures, to date, we have maintained a coherent early help offer, we continue to invest in early intervention, we recognise that by intervening early this can improve life chances and prevent problems emerging at a later date which can prove to be costly.

Although small due to our geography and in part because of custom and practice we have maintained two locality teams in Runcorn and Widnes. Our early help workforce is stable and we have good retention rates. This has helped develop robust management and oversight and this leadership is helping implement new initiatives and maintain value for money.

There has been a focus on ensuring that the Voice of the Child is a particular feature of our work. This includes the development and collation what children and young people tell us and impact statements, and consistently evidenced voice of the child in case recording and documentation and how they have influenced their own plans. We are also developing peer and management observations.

We have seen an increase in all aspects of early help from universal plus through to high complex level 2 cases since the schools returned in September, this is monitored by Principal Managers and seniors and discussed in Team Around the Family (TAF) manager meetings for the Divisional Manager to discuss in Divisional Manager Team meetings and pick up on any key themes and trends.

There are, at the time of writing, 566 open CAFs in the borough. This is the highest figure recorded previously numbers were circa 420, and indicative of increasing demand. Service demand and team caseloads are monitored and any emerging themes, patterns of behaviour, problem practice areas, partnership issues etc. can then be explored with view to improve practice, improve capacity, identify gaps and form part of the reports to the Senior Management team and influence strategic decision making.

Similar to many areas we are developing support for parenting and reducing parental conflict. Senior staff and Early Help Family Workers (EHFW's) have completed train the trainer event and explored other tools e.g. How to argue better to use with parents. This is particularly useful in cases where separated parents relationship conflicts has a significant impact upon the emotional wellbeing of their children caught between parents. Parental Conflict will be incorporated as part of all Parenting delivery groups.

From August 2020 a significant development is that Drug and Alcohol 1:1 Youth Support Service have joined the locality service (2x Runcorn and 2x Widnes). This was a contract formerly held by commissioned services. The role of Early Help Family Worker with focus on drug and alcohol 1:1 support alongside holistic family support is an area that is being developed. The aim is to remove the categorisation of support and ensure sustainable change in the person's life. The workers are currently collating and developing specialist tools relating to drugs and alcohol support for young people and this is also recorded on the national database of drug monitoring (NDTMS). The new

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workers will hold cases at both level 2 and level 3 and work in partnership with colleagues in the borough including health education and social care.

Using our drug and alcohol workers, who have other tools for use with teenagers, we are developing better the group sessions for teenagers and working with other health and voluntary groups to respond to an expected increase of emotional wellbeing issues for young people.

A key development following a comprehensive review of CAF (Common Assessment Framework) is the move towards a Multi-Agency Plan (MAP) which has been co-produced with partners and is an easier family-based approach based on the outcome star model for children, teenagers and parents. The limited roll-out so far has been well received by families and was acknowledged in our last Ofsted inspection. It is a more person-centred assessment and plan that shows measurable outcomes for families and identifies progress made and supports our move to systemic strength based working models. 2021 will see the full implementation.

There are established performance dash boards which help children centres understand their local community and what is required. Across Halton registration starts pre-birth by registering pregnant mothers at ante-natal or registrations come through Health visiting, housing and other partner agencies as well as targeted early help work. Registration rates are a steady 74% with participation rates at 85%. The children centres have continued to support families in creative and adaptive ways including online platforms.

Halton's good level of development is a high priority for all working in Halton and our approach is co-ordinated through the multi-agency One Halton Group, Chaired by the Operational Director – Education Inclusion and Provision. The children's centres contribute in many ways to improve this through universal and targeted provision incorporating the early year's foundation stage, child development priorities and partnership with parents. There has been a strong focus on communication and language. Talk Halton programme is the main service delivery model and we have extensive WellComm screening.

Numbers of under 1s registered continues to be lower than expected at 50%, Runcorn is lower than Widnes. Widnes continue to benefit from the Health visiting teams delivering family health clinics in the centres supported by children's centre staff. In Runcorn two health clinics have now started in the Runcorn centres with a view to identify families in need of support through their clinic visit. We want to review the registration pathway with partners to find alternative routes to increase the number of under 1s registered with children's centres.

Halton is part of Liverpool city region and in partnership with Knowsley will be implementing PAUSE programme across the boroughs in April 2021, recruitment has taken place and all staff will be in post by the end of March 21. PAUSE is a very intensive level of support programme for women who have had two or more children removed into care. The aim is to encourage the women to take a PAUSE from pregnancy and

gain help support and guidance about future choices with regards to pregnancy and motherhood.

Disabled children and young people in this group were significantly disadvantaged as they were less likely to attend schools during COVID-19 owing to health needs, our short-break centre closed as a result of the number of staff shielding, the usual support activities ceased and some parents ceased support at home because of concerns of about transmission from care staff. Working with providers, all families had as a minimum a weekly virtual contact plan. Activity packs and resources were provided regularly, and we worked with commissioned services to prepare and deliver a range of virtual online activities with some individual face to face activities for families under significant stress and at risk of family breakdown. Flexibility was used with direct payments and personal budgets to increase use of family members to provide care and support and to purchase bespoke resources. A contingency plan with the CCG was developed to re-purpose a setting for residential use in the event of family breakdown for children with complex health needs but this has not been needed to date. Providers moved to increasing their amount of direct face to face activity and group work during the summer 2020, and the short break centre re-opened, with a re-introduction programme for children who had not been at the setting for many months. The impact of COVID-19 and continued restrictions/changes in accessing schools and support services will remain an issue for the foreseeable future until the situation is stabilised. Person centred support plans will continue to inform the response to individual needs and high levels of contact will be maintained.

Keeping Children and Young People safe by improving practice

The COVID-19 pandemic and the response to the national lockdown presented complex challenges with immediate action required to ensure the level of risk to each child open to social care was robustly assessed and reviewed. The ongoing pandemic and variations in the “Tier” system for example, meant that we continued to change and the service needed to remain flexible and responsive.

At the beginning of lockdown we put in place a strict Duty Rota consisting of 1 Principal Manager; 2 Practice Leads and 4 Social Workers being present in the office to respond to Duty calls, whilst the rest of the workforce work from home. These “bubbles” ensured resilience across the service and reduce the impact if a member of staff contracts the virus. This has proved to be very successful and we have not had any gaps in service, and we have very few COVID-19 positive cases in the workforce even during the most recent lockdown when our transmission rates were very high, we maintained good staffing levels through ready access to agency and planning for school return.

Recruitment and retention are a significant challenge for the social work service. On a positive note, all senior and middle manager positions are filled by permanent staff (apart from one agency for the duty and assessment team) as are the majority of practice lead posts, however, we are more reliant on agency social workers than previously experienced. At the time of writing there are currently 15 agency social

workers in the CIN service against 17 vacancies. Excluding the Duty and Assessment Team we have a 15-17% vacancy rate.

Recruitment has also been poor in attracting new and experienced social workers. A workforce review of staff exit interviews implies that poorer pay compared to other local authorities and the impact on pay of paying the cost of bridge tolls have been significant “push” factors in staff leaving. There were some positives such as the quality of training, support at AYSE level, the communication and some of the benefits of free parking. Numbers of applicants for social worker posts has reduced significantly, which can be for a number of reasons: delay in students qualifying because of COVID-19, people not wanting to make major changes and move to another LA because of remote working, pay and possibly the impact of the inspection.

A Workforce Development Group has been established including corporate support. All job descriptions will be revised in line with the AYSE and Knowledge and Skills Statements for the roles, and work will be completed with HR to re-evaluate the associated pay grades if required. This will also inform a redesign of the career progression pathway. A new workforce strategy will be completed by the end of May. A recruitment strategy and promotion of Halton as a good and innovative place to practice social work in development.

We have implemented a Quality Assurance Group with terms of reference detailing the oversight and tracking of actions and learning from audits. Embedding this new Audit and QA framework and reviewing emerging themes in practice, quality and management oversight will enable us to specifically target training and support in those areas and improve outcomes for children, young people and families. The Quality Assurance and Audit Framework is helping in achieving and evidencing effective management oversight.

Revision of the Supervision process to include a template to support and evidence reflective discussion. A programme of direct observations of workers at all levels will also be included, along with:

- Continuation of weekly performance meetings.
- Workforce development programme informed by Audit.
- Focus on recruitment and retention of staff.
- Focus on CIN and CP visits and reviews to improve the impact of our work with children and families.
- Implementing and embedding the revised Supervision policy/process.
- Developing the skills of managers in undertaking reflective discussions, observed practice, and annual development reviews.
- Embedding a systemic approach within our day to day practice.
- We will develop a process to include service user feedback. This will not only help to develop our service offer but also will support future workforce development.

We have issued reviewed assessment guidance accompanied with the improved management support and oversight at all levels.

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Halton is committed to embedding a Systemic Model of Practice. A number of the original cohort of workers trained in Systemic have left the authority, this has impacted on the full implementation of systemic practice in Halton. The implementation has been reenergised through the commencement of additional training and a steering group will be established in April 2021 to drive this. Last year the Local Authority invested in systemic training for workers at all levels. Further training commenced autumn 2020. Halton is now progressing with the vision of systemic practice being embedded across the service, as we train more staff in systemic work we will support the move by establishing a systemic team to work across the Levels of Need to support families at a much earlier level. The expectation is that the new CIN service structure will be implemented from September 2021.

An Assessment Toolkit was created for use across the Partnership, to support Professionals to work through concerns and provide rationale and evidence to subsequent decision making, with particular focus on the impact on the child. The Toolkit was developed during COVID-19 to support surge planning and resolve some confusion between existing tools. Training and consultations were provided for all School and Health providers virtually. This has improved the quality of information, timeliness and effectiveness, particularly from schools, less so health. Further work is planned to embed tools across the Partnership, this work will be led by the Safeguarding Practice Group in Quarter 1 - 2021/2022. The Assessment Toolkit is being embedded across all service areas.

Social Work England

In its January 2016 paper 'A vision for change', the Department for Education announced it would set up a new regulatory body for social work in England. The new regulatory body would have a 'wider remit' to look at post-qualification, accreditation and CPD (Continuous Professional Development). From Monday 2 December 2019, regulation of social workers was transferred to Social Work England from the Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC). Social Work England's purpose is to regulate social workers in England so that people receive the best possible support whenever they might need it in life and are committed to raising standards through collaboration with everyone involved in social work.

School Support - COVID-19

In Halton there are c19, 500 school aged children educated in 61 mainstream schools, the school provision consists of:

- 3 nurseries schools – two of which are now federated 1 infant and 1 junior school
- 47 primary schools
- 7 Secondary schools
- 4 special schools, (1 All Through School, 1 Pupil Referral Unit)

For a period Halton's transmission rates of COVID-19 were particularly high, peaking at 1300, this was amongst the highest rate in the country and remained above 300 for several weeks. The impact of this was high numbers of pupils out of school, college and

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early year settings and along with a number of bereavements in schools, this impacted on staff and community anxiety. We have worked well as a borough with Public Health delivering briefings, webinars and always on hand to support and answer specific questions and clarify guidance. We provided daily briefings from March 2020 to July 2020 changing to weekly in September 2020, we provided a coordinated and consistent approach across the borough. We have deployed Council resources to schools and the College when required, recently we diverted community pop-up testing to the College to support their Lateral Flow Testing.

Return to School Toolkit - An extensive toolkit was collated and shared with Early Years providers, schools and the College. This provided advice on a range of key issues including: supporting children and staff mental health well-being, trauma and bereavement; behaviour management; identification of curriculum coverage, learning and development up until lockdown. It also covered learning opportunities provided during lockdown and identifying any gaps in curricular areas; planning a recovery curriculum; learning from the New Zealand approach and logistics of bubble planning. Risk assessment and travel logistic details were included as was advice on; cleaning and health and safety matters; transition support for those moving provisions and sectors; signposting to key services and school staff recruitment support using a range of remote and virtual models maintaining rigour, fairness and equality for all.

Risk Assessment - The risk assessments were prepared by the Health and Safety team of the Local Authority and distributed to all schools, settings and the trade unions. Each school received a COVID-19 health and safety audit from the Health and Safety team. A number of schools received HSE (Health Safety Executive) telephone calls and one school received a HSE visit. HSE were reassured with the systems and processes in place.

An unintended consequence of COVID-19 was the building of positive relationships with all our schools and academies and we want to build on that. Feedback from schools, the college and early years settings on the local system was that they have valued the level of communication and support they have received during COVID-19. The launch of the Halton Learning Alliance chaired by Derek Twigg MP and driven by schools and not wholly by the Local Authority provides the framework to coordinate the disparate national and regional approaches to school improvement.

Safeguarding in Education

Following the departure of our SCIE Officer (Safeguarding Children in Education) in spring term 2020 we took the opportunity to review how we supported our schools to ensure their compliance with Keeping Children Safe in Education and also as a key multi-agency partner in safeguarding all children in Halton. We consulted with schools on the role and responsibilities and in agreement with them increased the post from part time to full time. As a result of the consultation with our schools and our review of practice, the decision was taken to re-position the role within the Education, Inclusion and Provision part of the Directorate and the post was successfully recruited to in September 2020. Since then the training offer provided to schools has been

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comprehensively re-developed with over 360 delegates taking part in training to date. The course evaluations have been overwhelming positive and the impact clearly visible in more rigorous procedures, clearer understanding of roles and responsibilities, improved referrals through to iCART, and greater appropriate challenge within and from the education sector in keeping children safe. School safeguarding policies have been reviewed and a model policy, with appropriate addenda including in relation to COVID practices, have been provided and a very significant proportion of our schools in Halton have adopted it.

In advance of the revised Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance we are already in the process of establishing a model of supervision for DSLs (Designated Safeguarding Leads) in Halton. This will be piloted in the summer term 2021 either remotely or preferably face to face COVID restrictions dependent, with a view to launching it in autumn 2021. This has been very positively welcomed by DSLs.

The SCIE Officer, Police and representatives from the Early Years sector are currently in the process of launching a pilot of Operation Encompass to cover children aged from 2 to school age with a view to formally launch this from autumn 2021. This has been welcomed by Early Years providers.

An Education Subgroup of the HCYPSP has been developed with a clear focus on driving improvement in safeguarding practice both from a multi-agency perspective but also within the whole education sector in Halton. This group has already provided input to the Partnership on a number of matters and has also escalated areas of concern from the education sector for further discussion at the Partnership Board. This is ensuring that safeguarding in education is a dynamic process here in Halton.

Improving the offer for children and young people with SEND

On the 1st September 2014 the Children and Families Act introduced the reforms and statutory duties on Local Authorities for how services and support are delivered for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND). Improving outcomes for children and young people by ensuring the assessment and provision we offer meets their needs and is sustainable has been a key focus in Halton.

As previously stated, disabled children and young people were significantly disadvantaged as they were less likely to attend schools during COVID-19 owing to health needs, with some parents ceasing support at home because of concerns of about transmission from care staff. During the different phases of lockdown we used information provided on a daily basis and each school was assigned a link member of the Specialist Teaching Team/Assessment Coordinator. This team ensured there was a robust risk assessment for each child and young person with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Jointly undertaking this work not just with the parents and school staff but also with colleagues from health and social care. Contact was made with parents and carers to check if they were happy with the support they were receiving and whether they needed any advice or help for their child to access education either at school or at home and if there was any additional support they required.

When children returned to school in September a daily list of the children and young people with an EHCP who were self-isolating prompted contact being made with schools to check the offer available and also with parents to explore whether they need any additional advice and support.

During the pandemic we have worked in partnership with the CCG. Through our regular meetings we have been able to agree clear and consistent messages for parents and carers and schools and settings. We also undertook joint risk assessments for children and young people with EHCPs and have together explored different ways to meet the challenge of delivering the support outlined within each EHCP.

Halton continues to build on the recommendations from the 2017 Joint Area Inspection and its independent strategic review of provision and services throughout 2020. This work has been delayed due to the initial lack of strategic capacity and the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2020, a new Strategic Lead for Inclusion was appointed, eighteen months after the previous post holder retired and in the midst of the pandemic.

Led by the new Strategic Lead, in July 2020 a strategy development group was set up under the SEND Strategic Partnership to develop a new SEND Strategy for Halton for 2021-25. The group had representation from parent and young people groups as well as from across education, health and social care services and providers and has been informed by parent carer and child and young person feedback, recommendations from the independent review and desktop data analysis. The Strategy development group presented co-produced, joint strategy for Halton to the SEND Strategic Partnership in December 2020 and went out for consultation which at time of writing was still open, once finalised this document will set the direction of work going forward.

For a number of years we have recognised the need to promote more inclusive practice in the borough as the majority of our children and young people with EHCPs are educated in our special schools and not in mainstream schools. Halton only has half the national rate of children and young people with EHCPs educated in a mainstream setting compared to the England Average. This will be a strategic priority in the new SEND Strategy for 2021-25. This approach will pull together the existing work that is being done to improve inclusion into a single partnership governance structure to ensure clear accountability to improve progress and achievement for pupils with SEN Support and with EHCPs in KS2 and KS4 as well as the proportion of pupils with an EHCP accessing mainstream education.

As part of the work being done to improve inclusion the Local Authority has been working with NASEN on a project around improving outcomes at SEN Support to deliver a more inclusive education system. This is focussed on school understanding of needs, early identification and intervention in particular for SEMH (Social, Emotional, and Mental Health). The project will improve mainstream school understanding of and confidence in working with pupils with SEND. NASEN have agreed to work with us to promote the cultural change required to promote more inclusive practice.

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All schools and settings are expected to use the Graduated Approach and over the last few months the Graduated Approach has been the focus of significant development and was simplified, improved, providing more accessible support and guidance to schools and settings. The new approach was launched in January 2021. The roll out is being supported by training and advice to schools through tailored virtual training sessions.

Throughout the pandemic we have been committed to continue to support the EHCP process however, we did advise parents and carers that not all advice would be immediately available, particularly advice related to Health. We also advised that EHCPs may look different and the process would be different as assessments were not being undertaken faced to face. This work was moved to telephone or video calls where possible. The decision-making panels still took place but the work was undertaken remotely.

Since January 2021 the SEN team has a full complement of Assessment Co-ordinators making caseloads more manageable and improving quality. A feedback process has been established and is now in place to improve our understanding of the lived experience of families who an EHC needs assessment process to support continuous improvement in the EHCP development process. A new Designated Clinical Officer has been in place since the start of February 2021 with a clear training programme for health services to improve the quality and timeliness of health advice.

Halton has continued to face significant demand pressures and growth in its cohort of children and young people identified with SEND. The January 2020 SEND2 report showed that 3.5% of Halton children and young people have an EHCP compared to 3.3% in England and 14.6% are on SEN Support in Halton by comparison to 12.1% in England. As at December 2020 Halton saw an increase to 1,030 or 11% in EHCPs with current data showing an increasing number of children in the Early Years with EHCP's.

Speech, Language and Communication is a key priority for Halton. The latest published school census information (Education Workbook) shows a rate of 20.7% for those children and young people with EHCPs. This is one of most prevalent primary needs and is a much higher level than our statistical neighbours at 12.8% and the England average of 15.5%. It is therefore vital that our provision is a highly effective, flexible to changing needs and responsive. From the outset of the pandemic, the provider service 'Chatterbug' restructured its provision across its hubs in Halton, Leeds, North Yorkshire, Liverpool, Leicester and the Nottingham region to a one-caseload approach so that, as and when pressure points arise there was an increased level of support and number of therapy sessions provided in Halton. Additional funding has been sourced by Halton CCG to provide a speech and language therapist to work with young people entering Youth Offending Services, in response to the high level of communication and language difficulties impacting upon this cohort.

With the rise in the number of children with complex needs we have striven to develop and increase our local capacity to meet need, however, we have been short of physical space on each site. We have managed to increase the capacity of 3 of the schools and

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are developing plans to increase capacity at the 4th. Agreement has also been reached with The Grange Academy, who provide secondary resource provision to adapt its existing provision so that it can increase the number of secondary autistic spectrum condition (ASC) places it offers and cease to provide its Speech and Language provision for which there is no demand.

The shortage of SEMH provision both within Halton and within the region remains a concern. The joint bid with St Helens for a secondary SEMH Free School has been approved and the Sponsor agreed. The new provision will offer up to 64 places between the two LAs, however, due to COVID-19 the provision will not be available until after autumn 2022, we are therefore working with St Helen's and the DfE to try and secure interim provision for September 2022.

We have used the Local Offer to post key messages and updates on services to parents and carers and schools and settings during COVID-19 and those who have accessed this information have feedback positively, however, it still remains a challenge to ensure it is more widely used by parents and carers as a key source of information and is more widely used by professional.

Improve progress and attainment across all key stages and diminish the difference between vulnerable groups and their peers.

The key priorities for 2020-2021 for Early Years and the School Improvement Team were to improve pupil outcomes and diminish the difference to national between disadvantaged groups and their peers. Work was also targeted to hold schools to account when the quality of provision, pupil performance or strategic leadership were causing concern, whilst supporting them to address these areas of development. The long term ambition for all Halton children and young people is to raise aspiration, achievement and the quality of provision across all educational phases. This was and is being developed as a Strategic borough wide strategy, entitled Halton Learning Alliance.

In terms of wider key priorities, the strategic plans were to improve speech, language and communication skills for Early Years children so that they can make relationships; develop independence; develop self-regulatory skills and build their vocabulary to learn about the world around them. These key skills would also help children to develop their love of reading, reading skills; understanding of mathematical thinking and problem solving too. With regard to schools, developing the enjoyment of reading; accessibility of reading materials and developing reading skills so that all curriculum areas could be developed has been key. Maths understanding, mathematical fluency and utilising and applying mathematical skills and thinking is also key to driving improved outcomes at all phases. The other main planned priority area was building capacity of leadership in schools to drive improvement at all levels from middle leaders; assistant and deputy heads; new headteachers and governance strategic leadership.

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Whilst detailed plans were in place to address and develop these key areas of work, as we now all know, unfortunately the pandemic as a result of COVID-19 did impact in a range of areas. The details below will share the developments across each key phase of education.

Raise Achievement in Early Years.

Early Years development and improving the proportion of children reaching a “Good Level of Development” (GLD) continues to be a priority. Whilst schools would typically assess and report outcomes against this measurement and nursery provision would use a local non statutory tracker “Ready for Reception” tracker, unfortunately none of this information has now been available for summer 2020, nor summer 2021. This is as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic leading to the Department for Education pausing statutory assessments nationally, and also aiming to ease workload and teacher assessment accountability pressures due to the effects of COVID-19 and lockdown. However Early Years provisions and schools have been encouraged to continue supporting children’s development in the key areas and continue to deliver the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum.

As COVID-19 led to Early Years and Schools having to close during the first lockdown (apart from provision for children of key workers and vulnerable children), the shift in emphasis moved to ensuring all children were keeping safe and well and were adequately safeguarded with provisions keeping close contact with children and their families. Children were provided with some home learning activities and support for their development. The key focus for the Local Authority was to ensure that there was sufficient provision available for children who needed to access Early Years settings/childminders and ensure that the sector were supported to be financially sustainable and viable post COVID-19. The Early Years sector were signposted to using national government schemes such as accessing furlough; business rates relief and accessing any grants they were eligible for. As a local authority in order to further support, in some cases we double funded children to ensure they could access provision if their own provision was closed due to illness; staffing; self-isolation pressures. We were able to offer childcare places throughout the lockdown periods and beyond for any parent who wished or needed to access childcare.

It was essential we established weekly communication groups with the sector to share updates regarding the Public Health situation; to share DFE updates and information regarding provision and to ensure the sector had opportunities to raise any emerging issues or concerns with us which we could share with DFE. We have continued these group meetings and have welcomed the improved communication across the sector.

During later lockdowns, the emphasis moved to ensuring all children who were at home gained access to remote learning and home learning activities and as ever all children were kept safe and well. Vulnerable children (those with an Education and Health care plan-EHCP; those classed as “Looked After Children” –LAC and those with a Child Protection Plan –CP) were tracked by Early Years teams linking with Social Care and SEND teams.

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Whilst we do not have data sets to show progress or impact of COVID-19 we do know that the Early Years sector are reporting that there are delays evident in children's communication and language skills; personal, social and emotional development; behaviour; independence and confidence; building of relationships; whilst fine motor skills, holding pens, crayons and other tools is also showing less control and manipulative skills.

Communication and language skills were an area of concern for many young children across Halton historically prior to COVID-19. We had previously bid for an Early Years Outcomes Fund and were successful in gaining a year's funding to launch TALK Halton. Whilst COVID-19 did impact upon the delivery of this, many positive gains were made with the team comprising of Speech and Language Therapists; Health Visitors; Early Years professionals providing training and support for Early Years practitioners, multi-agency professionals, parents and carers. Children have been screened using the Wellcom toolkit which found that Early Years children assessed showed that 50% of children in Halton were already demonstrating a delay in their language skills prior to COVID-19. However, using "The Big Book of ideas" and other resources, children have been able to receive intervention speedily in Early Years Provision and at home. The principles and learning from this project will sustain, whilst we are currently trying to source funding to continue this project beyond July 2021. We do know that nationally young children's speech, language and communication skills are delayed due to COVID-19 and we are also experiencing this in addition to the delays already experienced pre COVID-19, so communication skills will continue to be a priority for our region.

It is also evident that across our region we are also experiencing an increasing level of young children presenting with a range of complex health, medical and special educational need. The Early Years sector is reporting this in their provision and whilst many are inclusive and support children well, the pressures requiring specialist training, equipment, and on occasions staffing is leading to capacity concerns across the sector. As a Local Authority we have detailed tracking of the type and levels of need and the range of provision available but are seeing an increased demand for support, training and young children requiring some bespoke packages of support and/ or Education Health and Care plans. Further SEND support and training for provisions and for multi-agency colleagues linking closely with health visitors is an increasing priority for us to address.

Our Early years sector have been resilient and creative, with Early Years providers further developing their partnership working with parents and carers; they have carried out home support visits to aid with resources for learning and development and food packages. Moving forwards the focus will be on addressing children's gaps or delays in development.

Primary Phase:

Similarly to Early Years, all statutory assessment processes have been paused nationally due to COVID-19 and therefore we do not have any data available regarding attainment and progress. However, we established weekly communication meetings with Primary

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Headteacher representatives sharing key Public Health information; COVID-19 guidance; supporting with outbreaks and control management. In addition we tracked the attendance of children, particularly our vulnerable children groups to ensure that they were either in school, or kept safe and supported. Planning for a sequenced curriculum and continuing to develop reading, maths and a broad and balanced curriculum has been parts of the key messages shared with the sector.

In order to ensure that pupils were able to access remote education in the event of needing to self-isolate or experience a positive COVID-19 case within a bubble or due to national lockdown, pupils who were classed as vulnerable were provided with a laptop and a dongle for access to the internet to enable them to access remote education. All pupils were provided with a range of remote learning offers including live streaming; linking to The Oak National Academy; BBC Bitesize; virtual learning platforms; class drop in's and welfare calls; story times; outdoor and sports challenges; creative projects. Each school devised their own curriculum offer and contact and teaching arrangements for a remote offer, whilst also providing bespoke support and interventions to meet individual pupil's needs.

Since the return of all pupils on 8th March 2021 it has been reported that most pupils' were keen to return to school, although some pupils are struggling with anxiety and attachment difficulties. It has also been shared that learning has needed to be "chunked" as extended periods of concentration are proving more difficult to sustain for many pupils. Early Years and Key Stage One children seem to be exhibiting the greater delays due to impact of limited social interaction during lockdown and limited communication skills development. Conversely Year Six pupils in some cases appeared disengaged due to feeling they had missed out on leadership opportunities; the highlights and patterns of a Year Six experience missing out on residential breaks and wider enrichment experiences. Transition arrangements to their next phase of education, also requires amended experiences.

In order to provide challenge and support to schools, the School Improvement Team consists of a small core officer team, supplemented by Associate School Improvement Advisors (ASIA's). ASIA's currently provide the link officer role to schools to ensure schools are challenged and supported to provide a high quality education; are developing capacity of leadership across the school; provide a well-planned and sequenced curriculum meeting all children's needs. During the first lockdown phase, Ofsted inspections were paused until the autumn term where they resumed carrying out amended assurance visits. One of our primary schools and one of our secondary schools received such assurance visits to discover how schools and pupils were being impacted and how schools had adapted learning to address any identified gaps in learning. Findings were positive, although these assurance visits do not receive grading's. From January 2021, further monitoring visits were carried out with schools subject to monitoring and Ofsted found that "leaders were taking effective action to provide education in the current circumstances." Ofsted reports, 2021. From May 4th 2021, Ofsted inspections have resumed and we anticipate that several of our schools may well receive inspection visits due to the time since last inspection.

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With regarding to Reading, we launched a Halton wide Reading Strategy in March 2020, just prior to the first COVID-19 lockdown. Whilst plans were in place for a range of reading developments and borough wide activities to raise enjoyment and the profile of reading, sadly much of this had to be cancelled due to the pandemic. We do now have an ASIA colleague solely on driving the strategy forwards and has re-engaged with stakeholders to develop reading initiatives across Halton moving forwards. Reading audits have been developed to support schools with ensuring reading is a well-planned and structured priority across all curriculum areas, developing phonological skills; vocabulary knowledge and wider comprehension and enjoyment.

Maths priorities are similarly being developed with an ASIA focusing solely on Maths subject specialist knowledge; networking and sharing of information; identifying strengths across the region with Specialist Leaders in Education (SLE) and linking to Maths Hubs partners. This colleague has developed maths tool kits, maths audits and has shared a wealth of maths resources to encourage maths leads to further develop the profile, confidence and maths skill level of children and young people across Halton. Whilst some of this activity was affected due to the pandemic, this work is being reignited. Prior to the pandemic we had linked with the Education Endowment Fund (EEF) to develop a maths programme focusing upon pitch and progression at KS2/3 transition; the use of manipulatives and representations to support the teaching of mathematical ideas at all attainment levels. It will also look into approaches of how to provide opportunities for students to develop metacognition applying these approaches to teaching pupils how to approach and solve mathematical problems. Both Key Stage Two and Key Stage Three teachers have been finding it valuable to work together cross phases to share expertise, subject knowledge and differentiation and this is work that plan to continue developing over the forthcoming year.

As a small authority, we are aware that small changes in school leadership can impact capacity across schools and across the borough quite significantly. For the last two years we have experienced 10% of our Headteachers from the primary sector moving on each year, predominantly to retirement but also in some cases for promotion. This has required a significant amount of educational advice and support regarding Headteacher recruitment processes and working closely to advise and support governors in their strategic role. As colleagues are promoted across the sector, we have then seen a shift in leadership at Deputy and Assistant Headteacher level too. So that as a region we continue to proactively succession plan, build capacity and sustain a quality educational leadership sector, we have introduced local leadership training for new and aspiring Headteacher and deputy heads. In addition, we have been working with schools to develop subject specific knowledge but also subject leadership planning, behaviours and sequenced curriculums to support school leaders at all levels. These areas of leadership development will continue building networks and connections, encouraging peer scrutiny and linking schools with each other and wider stakeholders such as Literacy and Maths Hubs. Building strong and sustainable leadership will help to support schools to provide high quality teaching and learning experiences that will ultimately impact positively on outcomes and achievements or our children and young people.

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Governance strategic leadership is equally an area we are working to develop expertise and knowledge. Whilst as a region we have commissioned Entrust governor services to provide governors support, training and clerking, some schools purchase their Service level Agreements through other companies. Whilst this is school and open market choice, it does lead to a fragmented offer. Nevertheless as a region we had been building strong governance briefing and training events, but are aware that during the pandemic training opportunities have been affected and virtual training whilst offered has received little take up. As a region we will continue recruitment, training and induction of new governors and aim to further develop governor capacity and expertise across the sector.

In order to raise the ambition and aspiration of the Halton Region, we had planned to launch Halton Learning Alliance (HLA) in March 2020. Unfortunately the pandemic delayed this, but we have since launched HLA agreeing the principles of the Learning Alliance and the shared vision for Halton with school partners. A shadow board will meet until the HLA strategic and operational structures are in place to continue driving the vision forwards for Halton.

Secondary Phase:

Priorities for our secondary phase involve improving outcomes for all pupils, particularly with regard to English and Maths. The Cross phase EEF maths work is supporting mathematical development across the transition phase so that learning time is not lost when pupils transfer from primary to secondary phases. We have linked with Cheshire and Wirral Maths Hub to share training and updates regarding mathematical teaching and pedagogy; challenging more able pupils with their mathematical skills and knowledge, whilst also providing training for non-specialist maths teachers. Reading will continue to be supported through sector training; academy schools sourcing CPD from their Trusts; linking with Literacy Hubs and sharing of effective practice across partners.

In Halton, six of the eight secondary schools are academy schools, with a seventh school holding a directive academy order to convert. Local authority capacity to support the schools is therefore limited due to our funding streams for improvement only being linked to maintained schools. However we do have weekly communications with our secondary phase Headteacher's and leads and have developed closer working partnerships during the COVID-19 outbreak. We do work as partners to facilitate information sharing and networks and communicate frequently with the Regional Schools Commissioners (RSC) Office.

Attendance and Elective Home Education

The Education Welfare Service (EWS) is a traded service with clear and effective Service Level agreements in place to support pupils with a particular focus on persistent absence. The EWS regularly monitors school attendance and uses this intelligence to target support and interventions. EWS works closely with schools to ensure that interventions are put in place in a timely way and are targeted and appropriate to the case. The EWS works closely with schools and parents around attendance expectations

including holidays in term time, so parents are aware of possible consequence and penalties.

Persistent Absence undoubtedly impacts on outcomes. In 20/21 academic year autumn term attendance for secondary schools for the autumn term is 93.5% compared to the Halton data for autumn term 2019 of 93.65% and so attendance has reduced slightly as a result of COVID-19. Primary attendance is a concern with Halton's overall absence rate in 2018/2019 recorded as 4.43% as compared to 4.03% for England. Prior to COVID-19 all Halton primary schools agreed to jointly fund with the Local Authority an independent review of both the Local Authority's and schools approaches to attendance. Halton attendance for the autumn term 20/21 is 96.4% compared to data for the autumn term 2019 of 94.89% so attendance has increased following COVID-19. For special schools Halton attendance for the autumn term 20/21 is 89.1% compared to the DfE Halton data for the full autumn term 2019 of 90.41% so attendance has decreased following COVID-19.

During the March COVID-19 lockdown the EWS supported Children Social Care in monitoring daily school attendance of vulnerable pupils and worked with schools to encourage parents to send vulnerable pupils into school. They contacted families to offer ongoing support and advice to enable vulnerable children to go to school/access school work at home, access free school meals and referred pupils to other services such as NEET, bereavement support and referrals for counselling and mental health support.

From September to October half term 2020 the (EWS) made a decision in conjunction with legal advice not to use any statutory responses to attendance concerns in terms of fines or prosecution. This decision was made as it was felt a supportive approach would be more appropriate, working with parents and schools, providing reassurance, support and advice. As expected some parents were very anxious about their children returning to school and they decided to keep children at home. With this continued support and reassurance and visits from EWOs and schools the majority of these children have returned to school so the approach was successful.

The EWS has worked closely with public health to get advice and support since March 20 but also to access additional mental health training for staff. The EWS also works with CAMHS and Education Psychologists (EPs) for advice and support for pupils with mental health concerns. EPs and CAMHS will work closely for such pupils and work together to inform when a pupil is medically unfit to attend school. We have also established group consultation meetings with EPs and CAMHS to discuss pupils with SEMH and mental health concerns. This has been particularly driven by increasing mental health concerns of pupils, some of which follows COVID-19.

The tuition centre has remained open since schools returned in June 20 to support pupils medically unfit to attend school. We have also expanded the tuition offer to include live one to one lessons with tutors delivered through Microsoft Teams as well as using large screens in the tuition centre so tutors and pupils can be socially

distanced. This has ensured pupils have been able to receive an education that is best suited to them and their mental health needs.

EWS has robust procedures around CME (Children Missing Education) and have ensured that throughout COVID-19 any pupils moving into Halton have been supported in applying for a school place and go on roll of a new school. For any moving out of Halton the CME Officer has worked with other Local Authorities to ensure the new Local Authority is aware of the child and can support them to access to a school place.

Electively Home Educated (EHE), at the end of the autumn Term 2020 the number of EHE children was 130 and parental anxiety around COVID-19 remained the most significant reason given by parents. At the time of writing (March 2021) the number of children EHE stands at 133, so the increase at the start of the academic year is now flattening off. As schools fully reopen, it is anticipated that there will be further returns from EHE pupils back into schools, bringing numbers back in line with previous years (although no two years can, in real terms, be compared as cohorts/issues/family situations are ever changing). Comparing Halton's EHE figures with North West local authorities, EHE figures vary between authorities from 0.44% of the school population to 2.02% of the school population, with Halton's figures at 0.71%, and below the known regional average of 0.79%. Officers working with EHE families are now also seeing requests from families to help them return to school.

Halton Behaviour Support Service

Halton Behaviour Support Service (HBSS) have continued to provide support to schools throughout this period, albeit with an amended offer during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus of this work has continued to be to develop a shared understanding of good behaviour management in our schools, and to develop consistent practice across the borough so reducing the use of exclusions and more appropriately meeting the needs of our pupils.

There has been a regular review of all schools' behaviour policies to ensure that they are fully compliant, including reflecting the current DfE practice and COVID-19 addenda. A model behaviour policy and an Individual Behaviour Plans for have been provided and there has been an increase in the number of schools adopting these. This has ensured that school's policies are consistent with statutory guidance and that there has been an increase in the number of Halton schools working within the inclusive ethos supported and promoted by the Local Authority. Further support has been provided to Head Teachers and Behaviour Leads to ensure that the policy is reflected in practice. From summer term 2021 monitoring and scrutiny of this will be enhanced by the introduction of proactive behaviour audits which will be offered on a rolling programme covering 15 schools per year. The purpose of this will be to ensure that policies are not only compliant but are truly reflected in effective and observed practice.

Termly Behaviour and Pastoral Leads events have continued to be held to cascade information and share good practice. The focus of these meetings changes to address

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the emerging trends of behaviour being reflected in exclusions and in the reasons behind requests for support. In addition to these termly meetings and other existing training provided, HBSS have developed 'bite size' workshops that will be delivered from the summer term 2021, with the option for schools to book further in depth training. These 'bite size' workshops are aimed at improving and developing consistent behaviour management across the borough and to target emerging themes.

Since it was established 2 years ago, HBSS have delivered a comprehensive Team Teach training programme, with a clear and proactive focus on the importance of utilising de-escalation techniques but also including appropriate use of positive handling. This has ensured that there is increasing consistency of practice across the borough resulting in schools having a common understanding of how to effectively de-escalate and safely undertake physical incidents.

Mental Health First Aid has also been a major element of the HBSS training programme and whilst unfortunately no face to face training has been delivered, resources and remote sessions were provided to support schools in their preparation for re-opening. During the wider opening at the end of Lockdown 1 and the full opening in the autumn term 2020, HBSS supported schools in managing the behaviour of individual pupils who were identified as being overwhelmed by the return back to school. HBSS also provided increased support to parents through resources, signposting to other services and also direct contact with families as required. This has continued following the full opening on 8th March 2021.

The Education Workbook provides details of exclusions up to and including 2019 and shows an increasing trend upwards. However, comparison of exclusion data between autumn term 2019 and autumn 2020 has shown that there has been a 50% reduction in fixed term exclusions with a 40% decrease in the number of children receiving the exclusions. There has been an increase within the special school/PRU sectors and analysis has linked this to the fact that these pupils have not coped as well with the impact of the disruption to their education and routines. Analysis has also shown that there has been a decrease in incidents of persistent disruptive behaviour in the same period, with only 25.9% exclusions being accounted for this reason in autumn 2020 compared to 39.6% in autumn 2019. There has been a 70% reduction in permanent exclusions between the 2 terms. Analysis and discussion with school leaders has shown that the reduction in exclusions overall and in a number of schools in particular can be partly attributed to the challenge and support provided by HBSS in increasing understanding of the challenging circumstances that pupils face and the need for greater work to support them in self-regulation. Changes in practice that have resulted from being required to be COVID secure have also played a contributory factor. HBSS will continue to work with sector leaders to build on the positive impact that has been seen.

To meet the needs of children and young people with SEMH difficulties, in autumn 2020 the Local Authority launched a Secondary SEMH Re-integration and Outreach Service. The Bridge School have been commissioned to provide this service with the purpose of reducing the number of young people who are at risk of exclusion by providing direct

support to both the young person and school, ensuring the young person has the skills to self-regulate and the support to successfully re-integrate into their home school with no further exclusions. This service is working in collaboration with the Education Psychology Service and HBSS to ensure a fully integrated approach in driving inclusion forward.

The Local Authority have also worked with sector leaders to re-launch the Graduated Approach, and HBSS have developed an integrated SEMH strand to support the work of SENCOs and Behaviour Leads as part of our drive for improved inclusion. As part of this work schools and the LA have also streamlined our CARE Schedule and ensured that it is aligned with the Graduated Approach and school behaviour management policies. This is to ensure improved early identification and support of children and young people's SEMH needs and also to reduce the risk of exclusions occurring as a result of unmet needs. This approach is currently being piloted across a number of schools before the planned launch in September 2021.

Improving participation and skills for young people to drive Halton's future

Young people who are not in education employment or training (NEET) or whose activity is not known to the Local Authority

The 14-19 Team support young people in transition from compulsory schooling into Post 16 so they can continue to gain qualifications and training that will allow them to be economically active and be part of a workforce in the future.

Performance has further improved in supporting young people into Education and Training and the combined NEET/Not Known outcome is 4.3% for 2019/2020, (this has improved from 5.1% in 2018/19). The overall percentage for 16 and 17 year olds compares to 5.5% nationally, 5.4% regionally, 5.8% across the LCR and 5.7% across our statistical neighbours.

From the start of national lockdown in March 2020 the Halton 14-19 Team and their commissioned services maintained contact with young people who were NEET through phone calls, text messages and social media. Young people who were in education, employment or training but who had previously worked with the team and were considered to be at risk of increased anxiety or social isolation were also contacted and given the opportunity to maintain contact with the team for support. Every young person studying an Apprenticeship was also contacted to ascertain the position of their apprenticeship and whether they needed any support or guidance. Individuals were offered support including challenging lack of furlough payments, being able to take on temporary work while furloughed and support to contact training provider for online work. Those in employment without training were also contacted and support offered including where to access support for a self-employed young person.

Despite our work with schools, Post 16 providers and young people we saw a reduction in the number of young people with an offer of learning or training for September 2020,

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down from 97.4% in 2019 to 96.8% in 2020. The reduction is a result of our ability to make contact with young people, in 2020 there were 37 young people who we were unable to contact to discuss their September Guarantee compared to 7 young people in 2019. Our reduction is in line with what's been experienced nationally with September Guarantee figures for England down from 95% in 2019 to 94.3% in 2020.

The lack of 'cold calling' due to COVID-19 resulted in the number of young people whose activity was not known to the local authority increasing significantly to 2.5% by August 2020 compared to 0.3% in August 2019. Previously letters haven't been used because they result in a very low return rate but given the circumstances the 14-19 Team wrote to every young person whose activity was not known. The results were better than expected perhaps due to people working from home, for our November 2020 return to DfE our Not Known figure is 1.1% compared to 0.8% in November 2019, whilst increased this is something we have achieved despite COVID-19 and remote working.

Through the work with Post 16 providers and alongside other services we have been pleased to see so many young people progressing into education, employment and training and sustaining their placements this term. In our November 2020 return to DfE we had 2.7% of young people NEET compared to 4.1% in November 2019.

The September Guarantee helps Local Authorities to fulfil their duty to provide education and training to young people by ensuring they have a suitable offer of post-16 learning by the time they leave secondary school. The offer should be appropriate to the young person's needs and can include full time education in school sixth form or colleges, an apprenticeship or traineeship, or employment combined with part-time education or training. Despite lockdown work with schools to secure September Guarantee offers for the Year 11 cohort continued. Work with Riverside College, OBA 6th form and other providers in the borough took place to understand their policy for late applications and to liaise between providers, commissioned services and young people.

Emerging Issues

Independent review of children's social care

On the 15th January 2021, a 'wholesale' independent review of children's social care in England was launched. A Department for Education spokesperson said: *"The independent review of children's social care will set out to radically reform the system, and we will shortly be setting out timings for this ambitious work".*

The review will take a fundamental look at the needs, experiences and outcomes of the children it supports, and what is needed to make a real difference. In doing so, the review will contribute to ambitious and deliverable reforms, taking into account the sustainability of local services and effective use of resources. The review will also consider how the children's social care system responds to all children who are referred

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to the system. It will address major challenges, including the sharp increase in recent years in the number of looked after children, high and rising unit costs, the inconsistencies in children's social care practice and outcomes across the country, and the failure of the system to provide sufficient stable loving homes for children. The review should consider the capacity and capability of the system to support and strengthen families in order to prevent children being taken into care unnecessarily.

Wood Review of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements

In December 2019, Sir Alan Wood CBE was appointed to review the implementation of new arrangements. His review report is due to be published in May 2021, it is expected that the review will set out recommendations for making new multi-agency safeguarding arrangements for local areas more effective.

The Coronavirus Act 2020

The Coronavirus Bill was introduced to Parliament on Thursday 19th March and became law on Wednesday 25th March 2020. The Act has had profound implications for social work practice, education provision, health provision and every other possible provision for service users. COVID-19 is an unprecedented global and rapidly changing situation resulting in unparalleled changes to how we provide services and keep children and families' healthy and safe. Going into 2021-22 we will continue to monitor changes to legislation in this Act.

Ofsted Social Care Inspections

Halton have been inspected by Ofsted in
July 2018 - Focused visit of the front door (iCART)

- July 2019 - Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) examining the multi-agency response to children experiencing or at risk of exploitation, including sexual and criminal exploitation,
- February 2020 - Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services' (ILACS)

During COVID -19 lockdown Ofsted visited local authorities and children's social care providers from September 2020. The visits were to provide 'assurance that vulnerable children were getting the help, care and protection that they needed', amid concerns that some have fallen out of sight during the COVID-19 pandemic. Halton did not receive an Assurance Visit but will be due a focused visit in 2021. Ofsted will concentrate on an area of anticipated good practice or possible concern. The self-evaluation and annual conversation feed into the process of identifying areas of focus.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021

In April 2021 The Domestic Abuse Act 2021, will become law, it marks a significant step forwards and should transform our response to domestic abuse, which affected 2.3m people in England and Wales in 2019-20. The Domestic Abuse Act will provide further protections to the millions of people who experience domestic abuse and strengthen measures to tackle perpetrators and sets out the first definition in law of what constitutes domestic abuse. The definition goes well beyond physical violence. It

recognises that domestic abuse can be emotional, coercive or controlling or economic. The measures include important new protections and support for victims and include the Police and Courts being given new powers.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers

On the 24th March 2021, the Home Secretary made a statement to Parliament setting out [The New Plan for Immigration](#). The Plan aims to introduce a robust approach to age assessment to ensure we safeguard against adults claiming to be children. There are very serious safeguarding risks if people over 18 are treated as children and placed in settings, including schools, with children. As well as the obvious safeguarding risks, it also reduces the resources available to help other children. In 2019, the UK received more asylum claims from unaccompanied children than any other European country. Since 2015, the UK has received, on average, more than 3,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children per year. Where age was disputed and resolved from 2016-2020, 54% were found to be adults. On average, the Home Office provides £46,000 each year to Local Authorities to look after each unaccompanied asylum-seeking child. The UK is one of the only countries in Europe not to use scientific age assessment methods to help determine a person's age when they arrive into the country. Various scientific methods are used to assess age in, among others, Sweden, Norway, France, Germany and the Netherlands. The New Plan will therefore strengthen and clarify the framework for determining the age of people seeking asylum.

Review into support for Children with SEND

The review was announced in September 2019, five years on from reforms introduced to better support children and young people with SEND and will look at the how the system has evolved since then, it will evaluate how well the legislative framework and arrangements served children and young people who had special educational needs and/or disabilities. I will consider the early years, compulsory education, education from 16 to 19, and the contribution of social care and health services. The review stalled because of COVID-19, it is expected that the report will be published summer 2021 and may have implications for practice.

High needs national funding formula

High needs funding allocations to Local Authorities are one aspect of the distribution of funding to schools, colleges and other organisations that make provision for children and young people with SEND and those who require alternative provision (AP) because their needs cannot be met in the school they would normally attend. The DFE ran a consultation between 10th February 2021 and 24th March 2021 seeking views on possible changes to the high needs national funding formula. The consultation is seeking responses to specific proposals for a small number of changes to the national funding formula used to allocate the high needs funding to local authorities in the 2022-23 financial year and for views on some of the longer term changes to the formula that could be considered in future.

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|-------------------------------------|--|---------------------------|---------------------|
| Service Objective: PED01 | Improve outcomes for children and young people through effective multi-agency early intervention | | |
| Key Milestone(s) (21/22) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Work with schools to improve the level of attendance at Primary and Secondary schools (March 2022 Martin West/Debbie Houghton) ▪ Implement Pause project and support women to make positive choices, improving their relationships with their children and preventing further children being taken into care. (Val Armor March 2022) ▪ Revise Halton’s parental offer that will include further developmental of reducing parental conflict training (Val Armor March 2022) ▪ Work with key partners to develop a stronger multi agency approach to both targeted and universal families in Halton during the 1001 critical days in particular to increase the number of 0-1 registered and accessing children centre provision (Val Armor March 2022) | | |
| Responsible Officer: | Operational Director Children & Families Service | Linked Indicators: | PED01 01 – PED01 02 |
| Service Objective: PED02 | Keeping Children and Young People safe by improving practice | | |
| Key Milestone(s) (21/22) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Embed a systemic model of social work practice across the whole service; social workers, managers and senior leaders (March 2022 Tracey Coffey) ▪ Review and update Workforce Strategy in line with the Knowledge and Skills framework and the Professional Capabilities Framework. Developing the competencies, skills and knowledge of the workforce making them motivated, stable and ambitious will improve the outcomes for families and keep them at the heart of everything we do. (Liz Davenport/ Samantha Madden March 2022) ▪ Implement redevise structure for children and need service to ensure better resilience and management accountability to provide a safe and structured environment for social workers. (March 2022 Angela Povey) ▪ Implement redevise quality and assurance framework to monitor improvements in practise (Tracey Coffey 2022) | | |
| Responsible Officer: | Operational Director Children & Families Service | Linked Indicators: | PED02 01 – PED02 11 |

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|-------------------------------------|--|---------------------------|--|
| Service Objective: PED03 | Improve outcomes for Children in Care and Care Leavers | | |
| Key Milestone(s) (21/22) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensuring all children in care achieve permanency in a timely way. (Liz Davenport/ Angela Povey March 2022) ▪ Ensure that Safeguarding Unit escalate any delays or concerns using escalate policy (Susanne Leece 2022) ▪ Review and quality assure the commissioning of services for Children in Care and Care Leavers to ensure that they meet the needs of Halton’s population and inform future commissioning decisions (March 2022 Sam Murtagh) ▪ Through the quality assurance of Personal Education Plans, identify areas of need and support to improve outcomes for individual Children in Care (March 2022 Sharon Williams) | | |
| Responsible Officer: | Operational Director Children & Families Service | Linked Indicators: | PED03 01 – PED03 07 Additionally Attainment Information for Children in Care and use of Pupil Premium Plus will be reported through annual reports. |

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| Service Objective: PED04 | Improve the offer for children and young people with disabilities and those with Special Educational Needs | | |
| Key Milestone(s) (21/22) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop and Implement the SEND strategy 201-2025 with focus on priority 4 inclusive education. Impact will be monitored through the SEND Strategic Partnership. (Adrian Leach March 2021) ▪ Review the current framework of support for children and young people with disabilities, including short breaks provision (Sam Murtagh March 2022) ▪ Review direct payments with all recommissions co-produced with parents and young people. (March 2022 Val Armor) ▪ Improve quality and timeliness of Education Health and Care Plans. (March 2022 Adrian Leach) ▪ Quality assure all provision currently being utilised to ensure that provision meets the needs of our children and young people (March 2022 Sam Murtagh) ▪ Review in borough specialist provision and revise to meet the needs of Halton’s children and young people (March 2022 Ann McIntyre) | | |
| Responsible Officer: | Operational Director, Education, Inclusion and Provision | Linked Indicators: | PED04 01 – PED04 09 |

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| Service Objective: PED05 | Raise achievement across Early Years and all Key Stages, and diminish the difference between vulnerable groups and their peers | | |
| Key Milestone(s) (21/22) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monitor and evaluate educational outcomes of all pupils, vulnerable pupils (CIC: EHCP etc), disadvantaged pupils and the impact of funding streams (including Free EY Entitlement, Catch Up funding, Pupil Premium, Sports Premium etc) to raise achievement for all and diminish the difference between vulnerable groups and their peers (March 2022 Jill Farrell) ▪ Monitor and evaluate the impact of Covid lockdown and remote learning offer on all pupils and vulnerable pupils learning (March 2022, Jill Farrell) ▪ Review the process of risk assessment for schools and settings to target support and drive improvement (March 2022 Jill Farrell) ▪ Build engagement, capacity and governors understanding of the strategic roles and responsibilities (March 2022 Jill Farrell) ▪ In partnership with schools, review and design an effective educational vision for the region that meets pupils needs whilst raising ambitions (March 2022 Jill Farrell) ▪ Launch Halton Learning Alliance Strategic Partnership to develop an inclusive, ambitious approach developing contributing, successful citizens locally, nationally and globally. All educational stakeholders and community members acting with morale purpose for Halton children, young people and community members (March 2022, Jill Farrell) | | |
| Responsible Officer: | Operational Director, Education, Inclusion and Provision | Linked Indicators: | PED05 01 – PED05 05 Additionally attainment information will be reported through annual reports. Childcare sufficiency assessment will be reported annually to members through Performance and Policy Board |

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| Service Objective: PED06 | Improve participation and skills for young people to drive Halton's future | | |
| Key Milestone(s) (21/22) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Closely monitor the cohort of young people not in education, employment or training and identify any common patterns/issues to inform actions, guide the effective use of resources and to identify any future commissioning needs. (March 2022 Háf Bell) ▪ Work with schools, the College and training providers to review the post 16 offers of learning made to young people and increase the amount of offers made before the end of an academic year. (July 2022) (Háf Bell) ▪ Work with schools, the College and training providers to report where young people progress to Post 16 as quickly as possible so those who haven't progressed can be identified and contacted to offer support (October 2021) (Háf Bell) ▪ Work with Post 16 education and training providers in the borough to support the development of provision that does have clear progression opportunities (March 2022) (Háf Bell) | | |
| Responsible Officer: | Operational Director, Education, Inclusion and Provision | Linked Indicators: | PED06 01 – PED06 04 |

| Ref | Description | 19/20 Actual | 19/ 20 Target | 20/21 Actual | 21/22 Target |
|-------------|--|--|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| PED01 01 | Increase the number of early help assessments (MAP/PRE MAP) health/education and other partners are leading on (financial year cumulative to end of quarter Val Armor) | 421 open CAF 1473 CAF activity 302 pre CAF | N/A | | N/A |
| PED01 02 | Improve overall attendance at school (Debbie Houghton) | 94.93% | N/A | | 95% |
| PED02 01 | Monitor the rate of referrals to Children's Social Care per 10,000 0-18 year olds (forecast rate at end of financial year) (Angela Povey) | 422 | 524 | 465(prov) | 500 |
| PED02 02 | Monitor the rate of children in need per 10,000 0-18 year olds (snapshot at end of quarter) (Angela Povey) | 362 | 380 | 221(prov) | 380 |

| Ref | Description | 19/20 Actual | 19/ 20 Target | 20/21 Actual | 21/22 Target |
|-------------|---|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| PED02 03 | Monitor the rate of children subject to a child protection plan per 10,000 0-18 year olds (snapshot at end of quarter) (Angela Povey) | 54 | 45 | 50(prov) | 45 |
| PED02 04 | Monitor the rate of children in care per 10,000 0-18 year olds (snapshot at end of quarter) (Liz Davenport) | 99 | 90 | 103(prov) | 90 |
| PED02 05 | Reduce the number of children and young people who enter the care system (financial year cumulative to end of quarter) (Angela Povey) | 95 | 68 | 75(prov) | 68 |
| PED02 06 | Reduce the average caseload in Child in Need teams (snapshot at end of quarter) (Angela Povey) | 21 | N/A | | 18 |
| PED02 07 | Increase the proportion of missing incidents where a return interview completed (financial year, cumulative to end of quarter) (Angela Povey/Liz Davenport/Val Armor) | 72% | 85% | | 85% |
| PED02 08 | Reduce the number of young people who repeatedly run away in Halton (financial year, cumulative to end of quarter) (Angela Povey/Liz Davenport/Val Armor) | 114 | N/A | | N/A |
| PED02 09 | Record the number of young people going missing in the year (financial year, cumulative to end of quarter) (Angela Povey/Liz Davenport/Val Armor) | 265 | N/A | | N/A |
| PED02 10 | Record the number of young people flagged as at risk of child sexual exploitation (snapshot at end of the quarter) (Angela Povey) | 26 | 20 | 19(prov) | 20 |
| PED02 11 | Record the number of young people flagged as at risk of child criminal exploitation (snapshot at end of the quarter) (Angela Povey) | N/A | 12 | 35(prov) | 12 |
| PED03 01 | Reduce the number of children who are placed in residential care (snapshot at end of quarter) (Liz Davenport/Sam Murtagh) | 31 | 20 | 34(prov) | 20 |
| PED03 02 | Reduce the number of children who are placed in independent fostering agency placements (snapshot at end of quarter) (Liz Davenport/Sam Murtagh) | 61 | 35 | | 35 |

| Ref | Description | 19/20 Actual | 19/ 20 Target | 20/21 Actual | 21/22 Target |
|----------|---|--------------|------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| PED03 03 | Maintain the percentage of Care Leavers in suitable accommodation (snapshot at end of quarter) (Liz Davenport/Sam Murtagh) | 92% | 95% | 93.7%(prov) | 95% |
| PED03 04 | Increase the percentage of Care Leavers in EET (Liz Davenport) (snapshot at the end of quarter) | 68% | 65% | 39% (prov) | 65% |
| PED03 05 | Benchmarking year – Percentage of CIC Residential and Leaving Care placements that have received a Quality Assurance Visit from the Placements Team within the previous 12 months (cumulative from April to end of quarter) (Sam Murtagh) | N/A | N/A | | 75% |
| PED03 06 | Report on the budget spent on independent and out of borough placements for Children in Care (Forecast end of year) (Liz Davenport/Sam Murtagh) | 9,672, 589 | Projected 9,583,822 | | |
| PED03 07 | Report on the number of children placed within 20 miles of Halton (Sam Murtagh) | | | | |
| PED04 01 | Increase the percentage of Education Health and Care plans completed within 20 weeks (academic year cumulative to end of quarter) (Adrian Leach) | 49% | 75% | | 75% |
| PED04 02 | Reduce the number of incidents of fixed term exclusion (academic year cumulative to end of quarter) (Vanessa Nice/Sharon Williams) | 707 | 500 | | 500 |
| PED04 03 | Reduce the number of children subject to fixed term exclusions (academic year cumulative to end of quarter) (Vanessa Nice/Sharon Williams) | 349 | 350 | | 350 |
| PED04 04 | Reduce the number of children subject to permanent exclusion (academic year cumulative to end of quarter) (Vanessa Nice/Sharon Williams.) | 21 | 30 | | 30 |
| PED04 05 | Report on the proportion of children and young people that to an EHCP placed out of borough at independent non maintained special schools. (Snapshot at end of quarter) (Claire Gurney) Long term target will be to reduce. | N/A | N/A | | 94% |

| Ref | Description | 19/20 Actual | 19/ 20 Target | 20/21 Actual | 21/22 Target |
|----------|--|----------------|--------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| PED04 06 | Report on the budget spent on independent and out of borough provision for SEND (Forecast end of year) (Sam Murtagh) – long term target will be to reduce | N/A | £250,000 reduction | | £250,000 reduction |
| PED04 07 | Increase the percentage of children and young people with new EHCP placed in mainstream provision (Snapshot at end of quarter) (Adrian Leach) | 43% | 30% | 50% | 65% |
| PED04 08 | Monitor the percentage of Special schools with overall effectiveness of Good or Outstanding (snapshot at end of quarter) (Jill Farrell) | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| PED04 09 | Increase the percentage of Education Health and Care plans for Child Protection and Children in Care completed in 16 weeks (academic year cumulative to end of quarter) (Adrian Leach) | | | | 75% |
| PED05 01 | Ensure all eligible children for the vulnerable 2 year old funding, access quality EY provision (internally collected termly information – may not match to published data from January census) (Jill Farrell) | 90% | 100% | | 100% |
| PED05 02 | Increase the take up of Early Years Entitlement for 3 to 4 year olds (internally collected termly information – may not match to published data from January census) (Jill Farrell) | 93% | 96% | | 96% |
| PED05 03 | Monitor the percentage of Childminders and out of school clubs with overall effectiveness Good or outstanding, or met if inspected in terms of compliance (snapshot at end of quarter) (Jill Farrell) | 95% | N/A | | N/A |
| PED05 04 | Monitor the percentage of Primary schools with overall effectiveness of Good or Outstanding. N.B. 6 out of the 8 schools are academies. (snapshot at end of quarter) (Jill Farrell) | 87.8% | N/A | | N/A |
| PED05 05 | Monitor the percentage of Secondary schools with overall effectiveness of Good or Outstanding (snapshot at end of quarter) (Jill Farrell) | 50% (Aug 2018) | N/A | | N/A |

| Ref | Description | 19/20 Actual | 19/ 20 Target | 20/21 Actual | 21/22 Target |
|-------------|---|-----------------|------------------|---|-----------------|
| PED06 01 | Maintain the percentage of 16-17 year olds not in education, employment or training (snapshot at end of quarter – published end of year information February) (Háf Bell) | 4.0% | 4.4% | 3.4% | 3.7% |
| PED06 02 | Maintain the percentage of 16-17 year olds whose activity is not known (snapshot at end of quarter – published end of year information February) (Háf Bell) | 0.3% | 0.8% | 0.6% | 0.3% |
| PED06 03 | Increase the percentage of 16-17 year olds with an offer of learning (September Guarantee) (Háf Bell) | 97.4% | 98% | 96.8% | 97.4% |
| PED06 04 | Increase the percentage of 16-17 year olds participating in education or training that meets the Governments definition of full participation (known as Raising the Participation Age) (Háf Bell) | 91.8% | 93% | Won't be available till later in April 21 | 92% |