

REPORT TO: Executive Board
DATE: 17 November 2022
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director People
PORTFOLIO: Children & Young People
SUBJECT: Children Services Improvement Update
WARD(S) Borough-wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To provide an update to the Executive Board on the progress in Children Services as part of the improvement programme.

2 RECOMMENDATION: That the Board

- 1) note the contents of the report; and**
- 2) request that the refreshed Improvement Plan is presented at the next Executive Board**

2.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

2.1 The Board will recall that there are several recommendations from the Ofsted ILAC inspection (March 2020), Focused Visit (October 2021) that would be considered under the Help and Protection judgement of a future ILAC inspection. These are specifically referenced below:

ILAC – what needs to improve

- a.) Consistency of application of thresholds and understanding of parental consent in ICART.
- b.) Quality of assessments, and plans, including personal educational plans (PEPs) and contingency planning.
- c.) Management oversight, challenge and supervision, to support consistent, good quality social work practice.

Focused Visit – areas for priority action

- d.) The assessment and management of risk to children, including the frequency of visits to children, in line with assessed risk and needs.
 - e.) Management oversight and supervision to provide effective support and challenge.
- 2.1 The Focused Visit led to a Notice to Improve and the establishment of an independently chaired Improvement Board and allocation of a DfE Adviser. The Board oversees the delivery of the improvement plan

which has four overarching themes: Workforce, Quality of Practice; Partnerships and Future Model of Practice.

- 2.2 Political and Corporate oversight continues with the Lead Member meets weekly with Executive Director to discuss progress and issues in the service. Alongside this the Chief Executive has dedicated fortnightly meetings with the Executive Director and Operational Director to discuss progress and the financial position. Similarly, the Leader, Lead Member and Chief Executive meet as an Executive Safeguarding Assurance group to ensure appropriate on ongoing oversight of safeguarding.

3. Workforce

- 3.1 The Board is aware of the workforce challenges at the time of the focused visit that there were too many vacancies with many not filled even by agency. Caseloads were too high and the quality of practice was poor in too many cases. The introduction of three managed teams provided the necessary capacity to reduce caseloads. Since August reliance on managed teams has reduced to a single team, which is due to end January 2023. There still remain a high number of vacancies across the service 35-40%, circa 35 QSW, many are now filled with agency and agency turnover has stabilised providing some stability. This has reduced average caseloads to a favourable figure below 20. The main gaps are in the difficult to recruit to teams in Children in Need and Child Protection.
- 3.2 The recruitment challenges are not restricted to Halton. The number of social workers leaving children's posts in English councils or trusts has spiked to its highest point in at least five years, according to DfE figures. The churn drove turnover rates to 15.4%, up from 13.5% the year before and the highest rate in at least five years. Vacancies also rose to their highest levels in at least five years, by 7%, to 6,522 FTE posts, a third consecutive annual increase. The National picture is even more acute in the region with several LAs carrying negative OfSTED judgements and relying heavily on agency workers and managed teams.
- 3.3 Recent activity has resulted in permanent recruitment of social workers who have completed their assisted year in employment; four started this month and three more will start in the New Year. Alongside this we have converted two agency workers to permanent posts and successfully recruited to the foster Care Manager post and Operational Director.
- 3.4 The Workforce Strategy is comprehensive but the main themes are to focus on the short-term conversion of agency workers and retention of existing social workers and a resourced scheme has been proposed for consultation. The target for recruitment is between 15-20, including agency conversions.
- 3.5 The mid and longer-term approach is built around revision of our offer and a 'grow your own' approach, which includes a strategic partnership with

local higher education institutes. The viability of International recruitment is also being considered.

- 3.6 As a small LA recruiting a relatively small number of permanent staff circa 17 would bring Halton in-line with the national average.
- 3.7 To ensure staff are included in the improvement journey several staff development and briefing sessions have been developed. There is a staff forum consisting of frontline practitioners who provide feedback and contribute to new policies, procedures and service developments. A staff member also has a seat on the Improvement Board reporting into the board at every meeting on staff issues.

4.0 Quality of Practice

- 4.1. The focus has been to ensure the 'basics' are being completed through case file evidence of children being visited regularly, have a current assessment, plan, intervention along with evidence of management oversight. Performance reported to the Improvement Board indicates that there has been improvement for example the completion of Children and Family Assessments over 80% and the timeliness of Strategy Discussion to Initial Child Protection Conference reported as 80% for the three month period between 1 July – 30 September. Key activities have included:

- **Core Skills programme** a compulsory 5 day training programme for frontline practitioners in Early Help and Social Care with the priority for attendance being permanent social work qualified practitioners (social workers, team managers and independent review managers).
- **Policy and procedures** – the Social Work Practice Standards and the revised Supervision Policy were launched separately in June and July 2022 and these are aligned to the Performance framework to ensure there is a level of consistency. The Social Work Practice Standards are newly introduced and these will be reviewed with a second version to be introduced in January 2023.. The Levels of Needs Framework including parental consent was re-visited as part of the Levels of Need. Audits show consent is now more routinely considered within ICART, including the necessity for when it's sought and the rationale if it's being dispensed with.
- **Quality Assurance and Performance Management** – An audit programme is in place but further improvements are needed to ensure effective targeted approaches to deliver sustainable improvements and consistent performance. In summary, there has been improvement in the quality of practice in the service but it still remains too variable with the majority of cases requiring improvement to be good and inconsistencies in the quality of

supervision. No audits have found children at significant risk of harm. In addition, the pace of change needs to accelerate ahead of any inspection. This is particularly the case for the children in need and child protection teams.

- 4.2 The Children's Management Information system was criticised in the last report and considerable work has been done to improve its functionality. Nevertheless, further reviews and feedback from staff highlight ongoing issues with the system that hinder practice. Future development of the system is taking too long and the extent and intensity of corporate resources to support the system have extended beyond what would have been expected as part of the original implementation system.

5.0 Partnership:

- 5.1 The Safeguarding Partnership has reviewed the governance, working groups, audit framework, adherence to Working Together regulations and partner's contribution to improvement. This includes reviews of our system against OfSTED criteria and lesson learned from other inspections that have taken place across the region. This work will improve the processes and multi-agency response to safeguarding in Halton. A key challenge across the system is capacity amongst partners to meet agreed standards of practice and work continues to address this.

6.0 Future model of delivery

- 6.1 Halton has previously invested in the systemic relationship model of practice and will look to this model as the future model of practice. The DfE fund Sector Led Improvement Partners (SLIP) to support other LAs in a variety of ways. Warrington is our closest SLIP that has developed a systemic model of practice and associated training programme. A work plan and training programme has been agreed with Warrington through November to March 2023. The current timeline is linked to funding arrangements. Further support from the DfE will most likely be available in the new financial year to support aspects of our improvement plan.

7.0 Next Steps

- 7.1 Work to the end of the year includes a refresh of the Improvement Plan and an updated self-assessment alongside audit and staff development activity. As set out in the first improvement plan a focus of attention at this time would-be on our Children in Care and Care Leavers service activity is underway and that will include the Corporate Parenting Board.
- 7.2 To accelerate improvement additional investment of resource and capacity as part of the Corporate Transformation programme has been added providing capacity and opportunity to develop a sustainable improvement programme.

7.3 Finally, the DfE Notice to Improve was set for 12 months as part of the process the DfE will undertake a review in January. The Notice would only be removed following a full OfSTED Inspection.

8.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 Recruitment and retention plans linked to the Improvement Plan several have policy implications that will need to be considered further.

9.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 The Improvement Program and refreshed Improvement Plan will have financial implications which will be included in the Corporate Transformation Programme. Further Government intervention may lead to increased demand on financial resources.

10.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

10.1 **Children & Young People in Halton**

10.1.1 Improving Children Services is key to ensuring that children and young people are safe and protected,

10.2 **Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton**

None identified.

10.3 **A Healthy Halton**

10.3.1 Children and young people whose health needs and level of development is potentially compromised are identified early and multi-agency support is in place to support them.

10.4 **A Safer Halton**

10.4.1 Children who are at risk of harm are identified quickly and services work together to minimise the risk of harm and take action to formally protect children in a timely way.

10.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**

None identified.

11.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

11.1 Insufficient progress in improving the quality of practice across Children's Services could lead to a poor OfSTED outcome and increase the possibility of Government intervention

12.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

None Identified

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

None.