

REPORT TO: Children, Young People & Families PPB
DATE: 15th July 2024
REPORTING OFFICER: Executive Director of Children's Services
PORTFOLIO: Children, Young People & Families
SUBJECT: Children's Social Care
WARD(S) Boroughwide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To provide and update to Members on the progress of Children's Social Care.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That the report be noted.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 Overview report of Children's Social Care Services.

3.2 Childrens services in Halton are on an improvement journey, in 2020 an ILACS inspection advised services require improvement, in 2021 two areas of priority action were given which led to an improvement board.

3.3 Following this Halton has experienced fluctuations in its senior leadership team which has led to inconsistent messages and practice, however in November 2023 Halton appointed a permanent DCS and in January 2024 a permanent Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help. This has led to a re-focus for children's social care and a request for corporate support to significantly improve services. Over the last 6 months significant changes have been implemented around culture and practice, however there is a significant journey of improvement required. Outlined below are some key areas of focus:

4.0 Recruit and retain staff

4.1 Our ambition and goal is to create a stable and sustainable workforce. There are multiple workstreams below this ambition as it is a critical area in order to achieve consistency and sustainable improvements in practice to provide our children and their families with effective relationship based social work.

- 4.2 A workforce board was created in January which has produced a recruitment and retention strategy, this will now be the “way in which we recruit and retain our staff”.
- 4.3 Significant work continues in this area. Our newly created Social Work Academy has responsibility for the oversight of newly qualified Social Workers and ensuring they are supported in their first year of practice. Step up to Social work opportunities and apprenticeships to become a social worker initiatives are also managed and supported within the Academy.
- 4.4 Halton is attracting newly qualified social workers, with over 70 applications for the last advert. Out of this round of recruitment, 10 newly qualified social workers were appointed, they will join Halton over the next few months.
- 4.5 The next phase will be to review progression opportunities to ensure we then retain these staff as they become more experienced. We know from our data that the majority of newly qualified social workers want to remain in Halton. We need to ensure the pay and package of support Halton offer is competitive to reduce the reliance upon high-cost agency staff.

5.0 **Training, Development & CPD**

- 5.1 This priority is to ensure all of our workforce have access to high quality, relevant training to develop the workforce to provide the best service we can to children and families in Halton.
- 5.2 We continue to “grow our own” social workers and are building upon the existing ASYE (newly qualified social worker) programme. Halton received some investment from the DFE in December 2023 to develop a Social Work Academy which strengthens the approach to training and development across the service.
- 5.3 The Academy is delivering a cohesive training plan linked to need and knowledge gaps identified in supervision. The approach being taken aligns with the culture and values being developed from a corporate perspective to ensure consistency of approach.
- 5.4 With all of the training that is offered the department considers this against the longer-term objectives, ensure it fits with the social care review structure and provides job satisfaction.
- 5.5 The progression policy is being reviewed to ensure it aligns to the adults offer and encompasses progression not just up to management but to ensure that advanced social workers are able to support other aspects of the service, the current example is the training being undertaken in respect of AIMS- assessment of children with harmful sexual behaviour. This is a specialist area of
- 5.6

social work where Halton require a number of workers with specialist knowledge and expertise.

5.7 This approach supports retention and enables skilled workers to continue to grow and develop areas of specialism.

6.0 **Stabilisation of the Management Team**

6.1 As detailed earlier having a stable senior leadership team is critical in order to drive ambition and raise practice standards, ultimately this will improve outcomes for our children and their families. In February 2024 all of the senior leadership team within Children's Social Care and Early Help were permanent, this is against a backdrop of 70% agency in 2023. Through the stabilisation of the senior leadership team, governance arrangements are now in place with key milestones and targets in place.

6.2 The right people are in the right place to now start to impact and drive the pace of improvement. One of the most important areas of influence for the senior leadership team is the culture, influencing the culture can take a significant amount of time, however through effective leadership behaviours this can be achieved.

6.3 In September 2024 a permanent Head of Service for commissioning will join the team to drive a real focus on all of our commissioned services alongside our sufficiency agenda.

6.4 A decision was made in March 2024 to release 3 Agency Practice improvement leads and create one permanent Head of Service for practice improvement, this role will also incorporate the Principal Social Worker role which is a key role for Halton's regional and national engagement. This role was successfully appointed to in June 2024 and the experienced candidate will join Halton in September.

6.5 Having a stable and experienced senior leadership team will lead to consistency of practice and a modelling of key leadership behaviours. This is already starting to attract applications from social workers from other local authorities which in turn will decrease the requirement for high cost agency staff and improve consistency of practice alongside enabling key relationships to be formed with our children and young people.

7.0 **Service Redesign Project**

7.1 As part of a full service redesign, supported by the Transformation Delivery Unit (TDU), there are several areas of practice that are being strengthened to ensure we deliver high quality effective services for our children and their families.

- 7.2 We know that through early intervention/identification of need for our families we are able to offer the right support at the right time and support the reduction of escalating need.
- 7.3 However at times need can escalate very quickly and parents/carers may feel unable to continue to care for their children. It is at this point that families at times, require crisis intervention, this wrap around intensive support is offered by an “Edge of care team”, this includes needs led support which may need to be delivered out of hours or of a weekend.
- 7.4 Halton does not currently have this offer in place however via a redesign approach stakeholder and staff contributions have been sought. The feedback is now being collated and the working model will be drawn up.
- 7.5 This is an exciting approach and the workforce are keen to be a part of the co-design, it is anticipated through this approach more of our children will be able to remain within their homes where safe to do so with a robust package of support.
- 7.6 A full service redesign could not be progressed until our ILACS inspection had taken place, this is now complete (May 2024) and we can now progress at pace, services need to be strengthened, revised and re designed in order to comply with the Care Review recommendations.
- 7.7 Based on what we know we have identified some immediate challenges to address as well as medium and long-term aspirations and changes to build a Children’s Services that is fit for purpose, adaptable and able to move with changing demands and requirements in the years to come
- 7.8 The Care Review completed in 2023 saw some changes in how children’s services should deliver their services with the emphasis on resetting nationally the role to fall in line with the key principles outlined in the Children Act 1989. The current proposals around service redesign are being completed with the overall principles of the Care Review in mind.
- 8.0 **Children in Care and Care Leavers**
- 8.1 The children in our care and our care leavers deserve the very best services and care we can corporately give them. They deserve to live in homes close to their birthplace, have regular quality family time with their birth relatives and be supported to achieve their aspirations.
- 8.2 We have a high number of children and young people who are subject to statutory orders that identify them as “Children in care”

although they live at home with their parents. Some of these children require a legal process to discharge their legal orders. Halton have recently created a “Discharge from care team”, adverts went out in May 2024 and I am pleased to report that 3 experienced Social Workers will join Halton on fixed term contracts in the next few weeks, again this supports the change in senior leadership and how stability and culture can lead to increased workforce stability, previously very few experienced social workers have applied for posts which has led to high numbers of agency staff.

8.3 Halton’s Corporate Parenting Board has been refreshed and revised to ensure it is effective and harnesses the corporate support required for our children and young people. In March 2024 the DCS and Director of Children’s Social Care and Early Help presented at Full Council to explain the role of a corporate parent and to ask for support and attendance at the meeting, we know we need to improve our offer and have an advisor joining us in September to offer advice on how to corporately build an extensive and robust local offer.

8.4 As an improving authority Halton are offered small packages of support from other local authorities who are delivering good or outstanding services, Halton have made this request and are awaiting the allocation of some support from a NW Authority, specifically around improving the offer to our care leavers. It takes a “Whole Council to raise a child” will our methodology in harnessing the very best corporate support in this area.

8.5 We recognise and acknowledge sufficiency around provision and having sufficient foster carers for our children has been a challenge in Halton for many years. We have now set an ambitious sufficiency strategy to develop provision and Halton are part of a regional approach to increasing the number of foster carers through a project called “Mockingbird”, many authorities already have this service in place.

8.6 The Mockingbird approach to fostering is a global award winning and pioneering programme led by The Fostering Network in the UK, the approach supports local authorities to create and increase **sustainable foster care**. It is an evidence-based model structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides, this is mirrored by created “family of foster carers” who offer support to the substantive carer like a family member would. Halton is very excited to be part of the regional approach and what it will mean for our children.

9.0 **Local area partnerships and accountability**

9.1 Historically Halton has always maintained strong partnership arrangements with a collective approach to improving outcomes.

Covid significantly impacted upon these arrangements, coupled with significant changes within the Local Authority leading to a less robust partnership approach to practice and service delivery.

9.2 In response to this the partnership arrangements have been reviewed and codesigned with partners. The new arrangements were launched in March 2024. There is now a business manager in place and an independent scrutineer. A key joint priority setting day took place in June with an agreed approach to the priorities for the partnership over the next 3 years. A communications strategy is being created to ensure we all know our partnership priorities for the next 3 years and how we hope to achieve them.

9.3 The ask is clear, we must work together with a shared understanding and accountability to improve services for our children and young people across Halton, we must engage our partners and key stakeholders in order to improve at pace.

10.0 **Budget**

10.1 Every Council in the country is experiencing financial challenges primarily in children's services.

10.2 This is driven by profiteering from private companies offering care places to children at hugely inflated costs, some placements for children displaying complex behaviour can cost upwards of 22k per week.

10.3 This is being raised regionally and nationally and several articles have been published via the Association of Directors of Children's services (ADCS).

10.4 The sufficiency agenda is being progressed internally to explore provision for our children, keeping them close and providing high quality care. This will be driven via our sufficiency strategy.

10.5 The second key area of high cost within children's services is through the use of agency social workers, Halton currently has high numbers of agency staff, however as explained earlier in the report the recruitment and retention strategy has now been launched and will start to impact over the next 12 months.

11.0 **Summary**

11.1 It is a challenging time in Halton Children's Social Care services but we are meeting our challenges with ambition and commitment to achieving the changes needed. We know exactly what we need to do and how to improve services. We have a passionate and skilled workforce, who, with the right support, conditions and environment will move at pace to deliver improved services across the Borough.

11.2 We are clear that the children and young people in Halton deserve the very best services we can deliver and will ensure the journey over the next 12 months delivers our shared ambition and goals.

12.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

N/A

13.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Detailed above in budget section.

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

14.1 **Children & Young People in Halton**

This is an overview report that relates to this Directorate.

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

N/A

14.3 **A Health Halton**

N/A

14.4 **A Safer Halton**

N/A

14.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**

N/A

15.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

N/A

16.0 **EQUALITY & DIVERSITY**

N/A

17.0 **CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

17.1 None identified.

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

18.1 None under the meaning of the Act.