

Children, Young People and Families Policy and Performance Board Annual Report 2024 -25

Introduction



I have been the Chair of the Children, Young People and Families Policy and Performance Board since June 2021, and I am very pleased to report on the work of the Board during 2024/25.

The Board continues to take its scrutiny responsibilities very seriously and during the past 12 months the Board has had the opportunity to comment on a number of proposals and developments, as outlined in this report.

I would like to acknowledge the help and support given to the Board over the past year by the Operational Directors in the Children Services Department.

Finally, I would just like to take this opportunity to pass the Board's sincere thanks onto all the dedicated staff working across Children Services in Halton, without this level of dedication and the continued hard work we certainly would not be able to continue to deliver quality services and care to the children, young people and families of Halton. Thankyou!!!

I look forward to 2025/26 and the continued challenge of ensuring the quality of services for children, young people and families within Halton are of the highest standard.

Cllr Geoffrey Logan, Chair

Membership

The Board:

- [Councillor Geoffrey Logan](#) (Chair)
- [Councillor Carol Plumpton Walsh](#) (Vice-Chair)
- [Councillor Sandra Baker](#)
- [Councillor Victoria Begg](#)
- [Councillor Louise Goodall](#)
- [Councillor Eddie Jones](#)
- [Councillor Peter Lloyd Jones](#)
- [Councillor Tony McDermott](#)
- [Councillor Margaret Ratcliffe](#)
- [Councillor Mike Ryan](#)
- [Councillor Aimee Skinner](#)

The Lead Officer for the Board is Benjamin Holmes, Operational Director, Education, Inclusion and Provision, Children's Services.

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People is Councillor Tom McInerney.

Responsibility:

The primary responsibility is to focus on the work of the Council (and its Partners) in seeking to ensure that children and young people in Halton have the best possible start in life and the opportunity to fulfil their potential and succeed, and to scrutinise progress against the Corporate Plan in relation to the Children and Young People Priority.

This Report is a summary of some of the topics scrutinised by the Children, Young People and Families Policy and Performance Board during the cycle of its meetings. The Board have met four times in 2024 -25. Minutes of the meetings can be found on the [Halton Borough Council website](#).

Halton Children, Young People's Partnership Plan

The Board received a presentation on the development of Halton's new [Halton Children, Young People's Partnership Plan 2024-27](#) which set out the actions to be taken over the next three years to make progress towards achieving our ambition that all children and young people in Halton are **safe, happy, healthy and succeeding**.

It provided an analysis of the challenges that children and young people living in the borough face and defined twelve priority issues that must be addressed, alongside the actions and areas of focus that will form the basis of work moving forward.

The Children and Young People's plan supports the Council to achieve its Corporate Plan priorities and underpins the work of all those that support children and young people in Halton, including Children's Services, schools, college, early years settings, police, health and the third sector.

The Board were assured that individual consultation had taken place with young people from various organisations, that the SEND cohort were adequately represented in the plan and that preventative measures to children coming in to key were key areas of focus.

Performance Monitoring

The purpose of the QMR (Quarterly Monitoring Report) is to allow the Board to consider, and raise any questions or points of clarification, in respect of performance management. The reports detail progress made against objectives, milestones and performance targets and provide information relating to key developments and emerging issues arising during the reporting period. Members were requested to consider the progress and performance information and highlight any areas of interest and/or concern.

The format of the QMR changed from December 2024 in order to comply with the new corporate reporting template. The content i.e. performance measures also changed from what has been reported previously in order to correlate with the priorities identified in the newly launched Children and Young People Plan (September 2024) and to ensure it correlated with the Business Plan.

Children Social Care

Children Social Care have reported provided updates on progress at each Board Meeting. Children Social Care are on an improvement journey, in 2020 an ILACS ([Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services](#)) found that services required improvement, in 2021 two areas of priority action were given which led to the creation of an improvement board.

In November 2023 Halton appointed a permanent Executive Director, Children Services and in January 2024 a permanent Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help. This led to a re-focus for children's social care and a request for corporate support to significantly improve services.

The board heard that,

- A stable senior leadership team is in place and the creation of specific roles i.e. 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. And a Programme Management Lead to oversee the Improvement Plan.

- A workforce board was created producing a recruitment and retention strategy, with the ambition and goal to create a stable and sustainable Children Social Care workforce. Agency staff were reducing.
- The new Connect2Halton recruitment service would be used going forward to recruit temporary staff when required. In the long term, this would reduce costs for the Council.
- The newly created Social Work Academy had 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 social worker initiatives are also managed and supported within the Academy.
- There has been success in attracting newly qualified social workers to work in Halton.
- The Academy delivers a cohesive training plan linked to need and knowledge gaps.
- A service redesign is underway, one of those being a Discharge from Care Team. To combat the high numbers of children and young people in care who are subject to statutory orders but live at home with their parents. Some of these children require a legal process to discharge their legal orders. 3 experienced Social Workers were recruited on fixed term contracts. An "Edge of Care" service will also provide intensive support and prevention services for children and families at risk of needing to become looked after by a local authority.
- Every Council in the country is experiencing financial challenges primarily in children's services driven by profiteering from private companies offering care places to children at hugely inflated costs. The Board heard some of the initiatives to combat this including a High-Cost Place Panel now being in place.
- Sufficiency around provision and having sufficient foster carers for Halton children has been a challenge for many years. An ambitious sufficiency strategy to develop provision as well being part of a regional approach to increasing the number of foster carers through a project called "Mockingbird". The Board heard how this approach to fostering a global award winning and pioneering programme is 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.
- Halton's Corporate Parenting Board was refreshed and revised to ensure it is effective and harnessed the corporate support required for our children and young people.
- Partnership arrangements were reviewed and codesigned with partners. The new arrangements were launched. 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.

The Board was informed that on 12 July 2024, Ofsted published a report rating Halton Borough Council children's service as inadequate following an inspection that took place between 13 and 24 May 2024. The council was given 90 days to prepare an improvement action plan in response. This was submitted 21 October 2024. Following the publication of the Ofsted report a statutory direction was issued by the Secretary of

State to Halton Borough Council and Steven Walker was appointed as Commissioner for Children's Services in Halton. Progress against the improvement plan is overseen by the Improvement Board, independently chaired by Stuart Smith (Department for Education Improvement Advisor). The Board meets on a monthly basis and has adopted a thematic approach in its focus on the outlined areas of the overall plan. Ofsted will monitor progress against the improvement plan and conduct a series of monitoring visits following an inadequate inspection judgement. The first monitoring visit to Halton took place in January 2025.

The Board heard that by strengthening Halton's service delivery it can support families to remain together safely due to being able to access services at an earlier stage, improving coping strategies. Provision of care will support the development of independence for our children so that they can live in suitable accommodation and have regular contact with services that support; emotional wellbeing, reduce isolation and respond to changing situations.

SEND (Special educational Needs and Disabilities)

The Board were reminded that in November 2023, Halton SEND Local Area Partnership were inspected by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC); the purpose - to evaluate the effectiveness of the area's partnership SEND arrangements in improving experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The Inspection found widespread and/or systemic failings leading to significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND.) As a result of this inspection, His Majesty's Chief Inspector required the local area partnership to prepare and submit a priority action plan (area SEND). The priority action plan was developed in partnership with stakeholders from across the area and was subsequently approved by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission. The inspectorate identified 5 priority areas for improvement.

It was reported that the Area Priority Action Plan was developed in partnership with stakeholders from across the area and was subsequently approved by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission. The Board were provided with the Priority Action Plan and provided with updates throughout this reporting year.

The Board heard that.

- A multi-agency partnership Board was created to drive and monitor improvements, an independent chair was appointed. (HSSIB) Halton SEND Strategic Improvement Board.
- Appointing the SEND programme Manager was a key post to drive forward progress across all priorities in the action plan.
- Parent Carer Surveys were completed and the findings reported back to the Board.

Delivering Better Value (DBV)

The Board heard that Halton were successful in their bid for 'Delivering Better Value (DBV). This is a Department for Education programme working to identify and implement local opportunities to improve the outcomes for children and young people with SEND across 54 LAs, and aid local systems (alongside existing local and other DfE programmes) in their objective of achieving financial sustainability. Halton was given £1m grant funding, primarily to build resilience across all educational systems to

support and include learners with Social, Emotional Mental Health Needs. The initiatives outlined in our bid were designed to allow schools and settings to support SEND children effectively, without necessarily having to request an Education Health and Care assessment, alleviating the demand for specialist placements, and reducing both the risk of out of borough placement and permanent exclusions. The grant was split into two workstreams (1) Behaviour Support Change programme; and (2) Inclusion Framework. This additional resource presented a significant opportunity to positively transform inclusive practices across Halton. During this reporting year there have been reports showing the progress and success of the project.

Supporting Families Programme

In September 2024, the Board received a report on the Supporting Families Programme, it provided information on performance, funding and commissioned services it provided, as well as a case study example, showing how one family had engaged positively with the Programme. The report highlighted that from April 2024 the Supporting Families Programme had transferred to the Department of Education from the Department of Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC). This move formed part of the government's ambitious set of reforms to drive improvement in the way they support families and protect children, as set out in the Implementation Strategy for children's social care reform, Stable Homes, Built on Love. The transfer of Supporting Families to DfE would enable the Education Secretary to deliver a coordinated, whole system of support for children and families, as well as ensuring services are sustainable for local government. The programme's model of stepping beyond single policy agendas to drive local integration and whole family support would be key for the reforms around Family Help. At the time of this report being written, the Department of Education had not confirmed if the supporting families programme would continue, at that time the programme would therefore end on 31st March 2025.

Comments, Complaints and Compliments

The Board received the Annual Report – Comments, Complaints and Compliments, relating to Children's Social Care Services from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. The Annual Report, a statutory requirement, provided an analysis of complaints processed under the Children's Act 1989 Representation's Procedure and evidenced how feedback from service users had been used to improve delivery. The report also provided Members with an update and feedback on compliments made by clients and positive feedback from workers / professionals relating to Children's Services in the Directorate. The report demonstrated the positive impact and outcomes on the lives of people accessing services in this Directorate.

Virtual School

The Board received the Headteacher of the Virtual School's Annual Report for 2023-24, on the educational outcomes and achievement for Halton's Children in Care, and the school's wider work across Children's Services.

The Annual Report provided Members with information on the work of the Virtual School throughout the academic year and presented detailed analysis of how Halton's Children in Care had performed against each of the individual key performance indicators. This included a summary of the Virtual School's progress towards its identified key priorities for the academic year 2023-24, and the priorities for the school in 2024-25.

School Attendance Guidance

A report was presented to the Board outlining changes in school attendance policies, following the release of the Department for Education's (DfE) Working Together to Improve Schools Attendance guidance, in August 2024. The report highlighted the key changes, as well as their implications and responsibilities of local authorities. It was noted that the new measures were now operational across Halton's schools and all schools had fully complied. The new measures were designed to promote regular attendance, enhance monitoring and offer targeted support to pupils facing barriers.

School Performance Outcomes

The Board received a presentation on the validated school performance data which was published on 24 October 2024. Performance outcomes for schools across Halton at the end of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stages 2 and 5 were shared with the Board. It was reported that the outcomes for Key Stage 4 had been delayed by the Department for Education (DfE) and were expected in December 2024.

NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training)

The Board considered a report which gave the annual NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and 'Not Known' figures for Halton and the reasons for growth of the number of young people who were NEET. The report and accompanying presentation described the work of the 14-19 Team at Halton who provided careers guidance and support to those who were not participating and informed how they worked with schools to support young people to transition from Year 11 into Post 16 education. Members understood the challenges faced with provision.

Work Scrutiny Topics 2024-25

During 2024-2025, there were two particular areas focussed on through scrutiny groups; high-cost residential placements and SEND Home to School Transport. Scrutiny groups were used as an opportunity to explore in detail the work being undertaken by officers to reduce the necessity to place our children and young people in such places of care, and instead what we, as an authority, can do to increase the capacity within other areas, as well as to reduce the need for children to enter care.

The group also explored in detail the current SEND home to school transport policy, the authorities spend in this area and the ways in which this policy could be updated to reflect the statutory duties of the local authority, while also ensuring that families are able to access support, when appropriate, to enable their children to access education as a provision suitable for their needs. As an outcome, it was agreed that the authority should proceed to complete a public consultation on possible changes to the policy, with the responses begin reported back in the 2025/26 year.

Work Scrutiny Topics 2025-26

A particular focus in 2025-26 will be the provision available for Post 16 learners across the borough, including those with SEND, to reduce the number of children and young people leaving school at 16 and not entering education, employment or training (NEET).

Underpinning all of this work is the moral imperative. We are not merely intent on making efficiencies and savings. We, the members and officers working in Children's services, are determined to do the best for the families and children of Halton. This

might involve reviewing individual needs of particular families which require consideration beyond the confines of legislation.

We must not be afraid to take actions that ensure that no family is left behind. Every child matters