

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

18 January 2022

Present:-

Councillors S Aves, J Bradford, J Brazil, G Gribble, R Hannaford (Chair), L Hellyer, F Letch MBE, L Samuel and J Wilton-Love and C Mabin (Church of England Diocesan representative)

Apologies:-

Councillors P Bullivant, J Hawkins, P Sanders and M Squires

Members attending in accordance with Standing Order 25

Councillor A Leadbetter

* 21

Minutes

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 9 November and the minutes from the 9 December Standing Over Group meeting, be signed as a correct record.

* 22

Items Requiring Urgent Attention

There was no matter raised as a matter of urgency.

* 23

Public Participation

There were no oral representations from members of the public.

* 24

Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

The Committee were updated as to the Scrutiny Work Programme and it was agreed that the following items be added:

- A Spotlight Review on establishing a child friendly Devon

* 25

Front Door Review

The Committee received a report from the Chief Officer for Children's Services on the Front Door Priority Action Plan, which outlined the 8-week priority action and 8-week priorities progress around Early Help, MASH and Initial Response Teams (IRT).

Front Door was a critical development of core business and was the starting point at getting it right for young people by connecting families and children to the right services at the earliest opportunities and in their own communities.

Member's discussions points with officers included:

- Concerns around the MASH Guardian IT system were raised. Scrutiny had been notified of some concerns around the security of the system on a recent site visit and had forwarded these concerns to Officers. Officers advised it was not an obvious issue and it had not been identified by two previous Ofsted visits. Officers were confident that the issues were now being addressed.
- Members were aware there were difficulties for the Health services within MASH to access office spaces due to work from home policies during lockdown. The MASH Strategic Group, made up of all relevant partners, was able to share and discuss these areas of concern.

* 26

Early Help Review

The Committee considered a Report of the Head of Children's Social Care and Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing on the Early Help Review which aimed to support families early, to transform the lived experience of children, young people and their families; work together earlier to support families build upon their strengths; integrate service delivery and invest in local communities to support children to thrive and deliver improved outcomes for children and families.

Benefits of the Early Help Programme included:

- Aligning Devon's Early Offer to bring to reality 'Right Support, Right Time, Right Person'.
- Children, young people and families would be supported to achieve outcomes in a timely manner.
- Provide financial security to Devon's Early Help Offer to develop a resilience workforce.
- More families supported within Early Help, reducing the number of children and families needing a social care assessment.
- Comprehensive and clear Early Help offer, supporting children stepping down from social care into Early Help.
- Helping Families early, building upon resilience and strengths.
- Provide strategic Early Help leadership and oversight, with the vision of one team approach.
- Reporting data used to inform responses and offer support.

Potential challenges faced in Devon included financial stability around the core early help budget, staff morale and recruitment; the commissioning of services and how these will meet the needs across Devon and how commissioning relationships could be developed; thresholds and criteria

including the level of need to be understood across the partnership to ensure children receive the right support at the right time; capacity and recruitment issues with a number of teams struggling with the volume of work even if fully resourced; changing perceptions and attitudes around thinking outside the box to achieve transformation and practice improvement through performance and people.

Members' discussion points with officers included:

- Savings in this Service area would come from a reduction in the number of children who required support, such as a reduction in the number of Child Protection Plans. Early Help was required to ensure families were supported at an early stage to build on their own resilience and ensure children did not re-enter the social care system again.
- There were multiple entry points into the system, such as through MASH or from local triage panels, which often led to delays. The Service was working to create a single-entry point with partners to respond to referrals in a timely way.
- The majority of work was focussed on 0-2 year age range which had been a significant risk during the pandemic; however the contract worked with children up to the age range 7-8years.
- Members were informed that the consequences of high profiles cases, as recently seen in the media, can cause significant anxieties amongst staff and partners as everything they do is to protect children. What would often happen as a result, is a drastic increase in referrals as individuals and practitioners do not feel confident to make assessments alone, making it harder to pick out those cases that are very serious and need further support from services.
- The Participation Team would advertise the proposals with children and families and ensure a child friendly version would be produced.

It was **MOVED** by Councillor Hannaford **SECONDED** by Councillor Aves and

RESOLVED that

- (a) the draft vision for Early Help in Devon and Officers exploration of an Early Help operating model and offer, including the financial aspects, be approved;
- (b) the Cabinet Member and Chief Officer consider the challenges that will need to be considered in achieving the vision for Early Help in Devon ; and,
- (c) the Cabinet Member and Chief Officer be asked to report back on the progression of the vision for Early Help in Devon at a future meeting.

The Committee received the Report of the Chief Officer for Children's Services which provided a performance update on Children's Social Care including key data demonstrating levels of demand and response across help, care and protection. The Report outlined key points including a small dip in the number of referrals to children's social care which had been expected in the month of December, a decline in assessment timeliness due to increased volumes of work in the IRT teams, improvement in the timeliness of Initial Child Protection Conferences which had increased by 13% in the past month, timeliness of health checks had decreased slightly in part due to the pandemic and long term placement stability had increased by 1% whilst short term placements remained the same as the previous month.

The Report also included an Education and Learning Performance update, which provided an update on the current position regarding the COVID-19 context, highlighting that there had been a sharp increase in the number of positive cases in schools in the Autumn term. The peak was seen on 25th November when 1895 pupils in 214 schools were absent due to a positive Covid-19 test. As of this meeting, 2,156 children were absent due to a positive covid test and 306 were absent due to suspected cases. 152 staff were absent with a positive Covid case and 11 were absent with a suspected positive case. All children in Devon had higher than national average attendance.

Multi-Agency meetings had helped keep schools open and children physically attending and as a result attendance had remained above the National average, universally and for those in vulnerable groups. Members were also updated on the situation with regard to children's mental health, those pupils entitled to Free School Meals (FSM), permanent exclusions and the number of children accessing Early Years funded places.

Members raised the following discussion points and questions with Officers in response to the Report:

- The number of children recorded as leaving and entering the care system did not seem to add up to the headline figures of new children entering the system. Officers offered to investigate this anomaly for future reports.
- Members raised queries about the numbers of Care Leavers in unsuitable accommodation, how it compared with other local authorities and were advised where care leavers were living with parents or relatives this may have been unsuitable if a risk or overcrowded. Members welcomed that the report highlighted how many care leavers there were and what unsuitable accommodation they are in given it was an area raised by Ofsted.
- Regarding Free School Meals (FSM), 2020 had seen the highest number of requests received due to Covid and lockdowns, with families impacted by furlough. Numbers were now returning to pre-pandemic levels. Having reviewed the criteria of those FSM applications that

were rejected, the Service was able to identify that there had been a significant increase in the number of families claiming FSM but not eligible. Members were advised eligibility was a nationally set criteria linked to universal credit.

- Members considered the increase in the number of Fixed Term Exclusions (FTEs), however were advised schools were not seeing the usual corresponding reduction in the number of Permanent Exclusions, which were also increasing and was an area of concern.

It was **MOVED** by Councillor Hannaford **SECONDED** by Councillor Gribble and

RESOLVED that

The Children's Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Welcomes the Children's Services Performance Report as a continued opportunity to have oversight of the performance of the service, including areas of weakness recognised by Ofsted such as Care Leavers;
- b) recommends further discussion between Members and Officers on the content of the social care performance report to ensure they have a continued oversight including the inclusion of recruitment and retention figures, caseloads data and placement of the item on the agenda at future meetings;
- c) records its concern and recognises the challenges in ensuring dental health checks for children are on time and permanent exclusions; and,
- d) places on record it thanks to schools, teachers and all DCC Officers involved in the efforts to ensure children can learn in safe environments, including officers who have stepped into roles in schools to support those efforts.

* 28

Schools Covid Update

The Head of Education and Learning provided a verbal update on the situation in schools as at minute 27.

***DENOTES DELEGATED MATTER WITH POWER TO ACT**

The Meeting started at 2.15 pm and finished at 5.05 pm