

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

6 September 2022

Present:-

Councillors R Hannaford (Chair), J Brazil, L Hellyer, F Letch MBE, L Samuel and Ms C Platt (Church of England Diocesan representative)

Councillors S Aves, C Channon and M Squires (remote)

Apologies:-

Councillors P Sanders, J Bradford, P Bullivant, G Gribble and J Wilton-Love

Members attending in accordance with Standing Order 25

Councillors A Leadbetter and A Saywell

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Minutes

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 14 June 2022 be signed as a correct record.

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Items Requiring Urgent Attention

There was no matter raised as a matter of urgency.

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Announcements

The Chair welcomed new Committee member Ms Claire Platt who was representing the Diocese of Exeter in place of Mrs Christine Mabin. Ms Platt was the Deputy Director for Education in the Diocese.

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Public Participation

There were no oral representations from members of the public.

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Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

The Committee were updated as to the Scrutiny Work Programme and Members requested the following be added:

- Re-visit to social workers
- Discussion with schools on the economic and recruitment crisis and SEND capacity issues

- A deeper dive into some of the performance indicators most concerning Members.

To assist Members, the Director of Children & Young People's Futures provided a brief update on the 2022/23 budget position including:

- The predicted overspend for Children's Services for was just below £20 million, and included £7.9 million for school transport and approximately £12 million for children care placements.
- Several strands of work were ongoing to seek to reduce the overall spend including a programme of work with the LGA.

* **56** **Children's Social Care Performance**

The Committee received the Report of the Director of Children and Young People's Futures which provided a performance update on Children's Social Care.

The Report outlined the following key points:

- Overall, the rate of referrals over the last 12 months was stable and similar to the national average, but higher than statistical neighbours.
- Actions taken as part of the improvement plan had impacted on assessment timeliness with 90% completed on time in June.
- The rate of children per 10,000 over the last 12 months with a child protection plan was higher than the national average and statistical neighbours, but the June performance of 41 per 10,000 was the same as the national average, which was encouraging.
- The rate of children in care per 10,000 was stable and lower than the national and statistical neighbour averages.
- Outcomes for 19-21 year olds were just below the national averages and statistical neighbours, however for the 17-18 age range in terms of suitable accommodation and education, training and employment were significant below the national averages and statistical neighbours.
- The percentage of agency social workers had increased in June and the percentage of agency workers was likely to increase further in an effort to stabilise the workforce and enable manageable workloads.

Members' questions and discussion with Officers, included the following:

- Measures and activity were still showing to be inconsistent, partly due to seasonal variations and work was ongoing to improve low performance.
- ICPC timeliness and health assessments were the two main priority areas currently for the Service.
- The Service had set a target of 90% for all pathway plans to be up-to-date following a correlation being identified of the care experienced young people in the 17-18 age range between those without an up-to-

date plan and the outcomes in terms of suitable accommodation and education, training and employment. As of last week, 88% of pathway plans were up-to-date.

- A lot of work had been done around retention and the recruitment campaign continued.
- Re-referral rates were high and remained challenging. Those returning were robustly reviewed to understand if anything could be done differently.
- Members sought greater clarity on the following indicators in particular:
 - % of referrals which are repeat referrals
 - ICPCs completed within 15 days of S47
 - % Care Leavers in suitable accommodation: 17-18 age range.
- MASH – a new threshold document had just been launched and training was being rolled out on this, as well as training around good quality assessment to aid a reduction in re-referral rates.
- Officers offered to provide an update to Members on the 8 week priority action plan in the future and invited them to re-visit the MASH.
- Officers would look at whether the number of case workers on each re-referral was a contributory factor.
- In relation to the Leeds as our Partners in Practice and the 500 days of support, Officers would circulate to Members the report that had gone to the Department for Education which would provide further detail on this.

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Ofsted Children's Social Care Monitoring Visit

The Director of Children and Young People's Futures provided an overview of the Ofsted Letter dated 26 July 2022, which summarised the findings of the monitoring visit to Devon Children's Services on 21 June 2022. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority had been judged inadequate in January 2020.

The monitoring visit reviewed the quality of services for children subject to child in need and child protection plans and progress made on the areas of concern identified at the last inspection, namely, making sure that children received the right help and support they needed, when they needed it; making sure that children's plans were effective and made a difference; and the effectiveness of leadership, including the quality of recorded management oversight and critical challenge.

Headline findings included:

- Children in need of support and/or protection had not yet received a significantly better service since the last inspection; the local authority had not acted quickly enough to make the changes required; and the pace of change remained too slow.
- Since Children's Services had secured a permanent senior leadership team in the autumn of 2021, there had been a more cohesive,

systematic and determined approach to drive progress, importantly, backed by political and corporate leaders.

- Workforce stability and capacity continued to be challenging, often resulting in several changes of social worker for children.

The letter concluded by stating that children and their families were now a priority in the Council's plans; that Elected Members and corporate leaders were now embracing the need for change, after a long period of poor outcomes for children in Devon; and that the Scrutiny Committee provided robust challenge to senior leaders.

Members' questions and Officer discussion included:

- The Service were working with Leeds on the Academy Offer to provide learning and development for all social workers and practitioners across the Service; there was also a programme of workshops across the County, with a particular focus on good supervision.
- Cohorts of overseas social workers had been arriving and support plans as to training and accommodation were in place for them.
- Child Protection Chairs and Independent Reviewing Officers were a critical part of the team and a programme of work had already started with them. The team's annual report covering this work would be brought to a future meeting.
- Officers assured Members that with the benefit and preference of hybrid working, people had been encouraged to come back into the office 2/3 times a week.

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SEND Ofsted/CQC Revisit - Update on progress since the Inspection

The Committee received the Report of the Interim Deputy and SEND Strategic Director (CS/22/08), which set out the Service's response to the recent SEND letter and to detail the action plan for improvement. The letter had concluded that SEND services continued to require significant change. It was acknowledged that at an organisational level the Council had not made the progress it would have liked to see and that new leadership arrangements were still bedding in.

The Council had also received a letter from Will Quince MP, Minister of State for School Standards, stating that he was minded to issue the Council with an Improvement Notice.

The Interim Deputy and SEND Strategic Director provided a further update including:

- That an Improvement Notice had now been agreed to be accepted, and that the Improvement Notice would incorporate the accelerated action plan.

- The permanent team were still being recruited to, meanwhile, highly experienced interim virtual workers had been recruited into the team.
- A new case management system had been set up to help reduce annual review data, although there were still 1400 delayed within the service.
- A placement and transport panel would also be established involving independent headteachers.
- A project had been set up to review post-19 young people in special school settings.
- There had been three additional adult care social workers employed to work with young people in independent settings, and their families.
- The annual review process would be reformed, in consultation with health partners.
- EHCP forms and other paperwork would be simplified.
- Agency virtual education psychologists had been brought in to help with the delayed assessments, but would be a large cost to the authority at over £1,000 each.

Members' questions and discussion with Officers included:

- Members would like to see statistical neighbour data on the KPIs, and Officers would provide this.
- The Improvement Notice referred to wanting a clear plan to ensure it had in place a permanent and trained SEN team to enable effective delivery of EHC needs assessment and review system, and Officers agreed to produce this plan to Members.
- Recruitment remained challenging – over 20 people had been recruited, but another 24 had left, meaning new recruits had to be put into vacant posts, however, recruitment continued with interims in the meantime to help reduce caseload numbers.
- Exit interviews carried out had identified overwhelming numbers of caseload and pay and conditions as the overriding reasons for leaving.
- Further funding was needed for the virtual education psychologists that had been brought in to deal with the delayed EHC assessments, and also for additional SEN caseworkers.

It was **RESOLVED** by Councillor Hannaford, **SECONDED** by Councillor Hellyer and

RESOLVED that the Committee raises concern to Cabinet to satisfy itself about the realism of achieving a balanced budget across Children's Services and SEND, while acknowledging that services need more investments to improve by recruiting more caseworkers and reducing backlogs, and refers to Cabinet for consideration.

The Chair thanked Officers for the work they were doing.

* **59** **Supporting Care Leavers in Housing and Accommodation**

The Senior Manager for Corporate Parenting presented the Committee with a snapshot of the accommodation status for Care Experienced Young People as at June 2022 and reported further as follows:

- A meeting to discuss Housing Solutions for Care Experienced Young People had taken place on 12 July with District Housing Officers and Elected Members.
- A joint care leaver protocol was being worked on to develop closer links with Districts
- The ask was for cross-party Member support for a Council Tax exemption for under 25 Care Leavers and any other help.

Members were concerned at the 1.2% (5) where the local authority had no information on, despite having a duty to keep in contact until 25.

The Committee welcomed future updates from the Corporate Parenting Manager.

* **60** **Children's Standing Overview Group**

The Committee received the Report of the Children's Standing Overview Group meeting that took place on 19 July 2022.

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

The Meeting started at 10.30 am and finished at 1.14 pm