

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

15 November 2022

Present:-

Councillors R Hannaford (Chair), P Sanders (Vice-Chair), S Aves, J Bradford, J Brazil, P Bullivant and F Letch MBE and Ms C Platt (Church of England Diocesan representative)

Councillors C Channon, L Samuel and M Squires (remote)

Apologies:-

Councillors G Gribble, J Hawkins, L Hellyer and J Wilton-Love

Members attending in accordance with Standing Order 25

Councillors A Leadbetter and A Saywell (part)

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Minutes

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 6 September 2022 be signed as a correct record.

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Items Requiring Urgent Attention

Children's Services Leadership Arrangements

The Chief Executive was in attendance and reported on a change in the Children's Services leadership team following Melissa Caslake, the Director of Children and Young People's Futures having left the Council. Changes in roles in the short-term were as follows:

- Lisa Bursill - Acting Director of Children and Young People's Future
- Janet Fraser - Head of Children's Social Care
- New starter, Aisling Khan - Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing.

Members questioned how the Phase 1 'reshape' would be configured and the Acting Director agreed to provide details for Members on this after the meeting.

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Announcements

The Chair made the following announcements:

- (a) Welcome to Mrs A Mayes who was attending the meeting in her capacity as Co-opted member of the Council's Standards Committee to observe and monitor compliance with the Council's ethical governance framework.
- (b) Melanie John-Ross had been appointed as the Committee's Independent Special Advisor. Melanie's most recent experience was as the Director of Children's Services in Barnsley.
- (c) Welcome to Aisling Khan, taking over the role of Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing, who was currently with the Council of the Isles of Scilly and would be working part-time for Devon County Council.

* 64 **Public Participation**

There were no oral representations from members of the public.

* 65 **Scrutiny Committee Work Programme**

The Committee were updated as to the Work Programme and requested the following items be added to it:

- The areas of development/investigation from the SEND Task Group
- Update on Child Friendly Devon
- Possible CSOG in December.

* 66 **In-year Budget Position**

The Chief Executive and the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools both attended to speak to the report, stating that the financial situation was the worse the Council had faced for many years. There was however an enormous amount of work going on in the Service to ensure that real improvements would be made.

The Committee then considered the Report of the Chief Officer for Children's Services, which set out the key budget issues for the Service identifying risks and actions to mitigate.

At month 2, it had been reported that the Council faced a financial pressure of £30.5 million with a further risk linked to inflation volatility of around £10 million. At month 6, the Council was facing a comparable in-year deficit of £33 million.

A cross-organisational Financial Sustainability Programme had been set up to identify and deliver savings to address the in-year overspend and identify ways to stabilise financial sustainability. The impact of this work had identified £26.5 million of further savings and additional income that revised the total forecast overspend down to £6.3 million.

The combined pressures on the service of demand in SEND, the increase in high-cost placements for children in care and school transport costs were significant but consistent with the national context.

A priority for Children's Services continued to be to ensure that vulnerable children were supported and protected and to create a future in a Child Friendly Devon where all children and young people were safe, loved and thrived and had equal access to opportunities to meet their full potential.

Members' questions and discussion points included:

- The Government's Autumn Statement would be announced on Thursday of this week and although not known it was assumed that more spending cuts would be announced.
- The majority of the £26.5 million identified as further savings were one-off savings by delaying work, e.g. the Adult Care First software system was due to be replaced: this would now be delayed.
- Regular reviews of high cost placements had been strengthened to ensure correct charging levels; and providers' rates more robustly challenged. Case studies of placements would be provided to a future meeting.
- Devon was hindered by high property prices in the County.
- A placement sufficiency strategy was currently being worked on, informed by the review of high cost placements; and also bids to the Department for Education for capital funding for developing in-house residential works.
- The recruitment drive for foster carers continued, following the interruption from the pandemic, supported by the Mockingbird programme, however, the fostering team remained under-funded in relation to recruitment.
- Exeter Chiefs had agreed to support Devon with its foster caring campaign.
- The importance of early intervention and for local schools to become more inclusive thus saving transport costs.
- Agency social workers received the same induction, training and performance management as permanent staff, tracked through auditing.
- Concern that Exeter University were not offering training for social workers, and the Cabinet Member agreed to follow this up with the Vice-Chancellor.
- Concern that the Memorandum of Understanding across the South West on agency pay rates was not effective. The Chief Executive asked the Acting Director to follow this up in regional ADCS meetings.
- In-house school transport was being considered and four people carriers were currently being trialled for special needs transport with early indications showing that costs were being saved. Use of the high

cost social care placement transport and NHS transport was also being considered.

It was **MOVED** by Councillor Hannaford, **SECONDED** by Councillor Bullivant and

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- (a) Places on record its continuing concern about the significant overspend in Children's Services, the SEND Dedicated Schools Grant overspend in Month 6 and the rate of contract relinquishing and inflation affecting the School Transport budget.
- (b) Re-states its concern from the Committee meeting on 18 January 2022 relating to the realism of achieving savings considering the cost of living pressures, and looks forward to the anticipated report to Cabinet in December regarding Children's Centres and the Government's funding intentions on Thursday 17 November.
- (c) Welcomes the hard work of officers to identify and realise savings.
- (d) Welcomes the opportunity to be sighted on case studies of children in placements at a future meeting.
- (e) Welcomes the work of officers to improve the universal offer within schools to improve inclusion.
- (f) Supports the Council's work on in-house provision in transport and piloting of placements of children in care to reduce the overspends in these areas and improve market sufficiency.

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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 in Devon was now below the national average, but higher than statistical neighbours.
- Assessment timeliness had dropped to 85% over the summer months.
- The rate of children per 10,000 subject to a child protection plan had reduced to 37 in August, lower than the national average, but higher than statistical neighbours.
- The rate of children in care per 10,000 was stable and lower than the national and statistical neighbour averages.

- Care experienced young people in suitable accommodation had improved in August.
- The percentage of agency social workers increased in August as a direct result of filling vacant posts with agency workers which continued to contribute to reducing caseloads.

Members' questions and discussion points with Officers, included:

- Timeliness of health checks for children in care had risen since the report and was currently 79%.
- Repeat referrals was an area that would continue to be scrutinised.
- A review of the data provided to include explanatory narrative and a traffic light system would be of benefit to Members.
- Officers shared Members' concern at the low percentage of ICPCs completed within 15 days of S47 (53%) compared to statistical neighbours (89%) and were working hard to remedy this. Officers reported that children who went over the 15 days were known to them and seen regularly. October's performance was showing a continuing improvement at 72%.
- Officers assured Members that contingency plans were in place for safeguarding children who fell outside of the ICPCs completed within 15 days.

It was **MOVED** by Councillor Hannaford, **SECONDED** by Councillor Bullivant and

RESOLVED that the Committee supports the work of the Cabinet Member and Senior Leaders to make progress across Children's Social Care and hold partners to account for their own performance; and anticipates further updates from Officers on the ongoing work to improve the Committee's particular areas of concern around Initial Child Protection Case Conferences and Care Leavers not in Education, Employment and Training.

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SEND Task Group

The Committee considered the Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Task Group report which looked at how children and young people with SEND were supported by the Council; how the Council worked with families, partners, schools and colleges; and the impact of the rise in demand on staff wellbeing and morale.

The Task Group had heard from a range of witnesses including the Council's own staff, young people, parents, carers and school leaders. The Task Group recognised the significant amount of pressure placed on the system and placed a special thank you to all of those working in Devon to improve the lives of children and young people with SEND.

The report's recommendations were based on evidence gathered from witnesses and the Task Group wished to place on record its sincere thanks to the many witnesses who gave up their time to talk to the task group openly and honestly to allow the Task Group to fully understand how the system functioned.

The Committee thanked the Task Group for its exhaustive and thorough report.

It was **MOVED** by Councillor Aves, **SECONDED** by Councillor Letch and

RESOLVED that the Task Group report and recommendations be endorsed and commended to the Cabinet.

* 69 **Children's Standing Overview Group**

The Committee received the report from the Children's Scrutiny Committee Standing Overview Group held on 18 October 2022.

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

The Meeting started at 10.30 am and finished at 1.20 pm