

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

14 March 2023

Present:-

Councillors R Hannaford (Chair), P Sanders, S Aves, J Bradford, J Brazil, C Channon, L Hellyer, F Letch MBE, L Samuel, M Squires and J Wilton-Love

Ms Claire Platt (Church of England Diocesan representative) (remote)

Apologies:-

Councillors G Gribble and J Hawkins

Members attending in accordance with Standing Order 25

Councillor A Leadbetter

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Minutes

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the two meetings held on 26 January 2023 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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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 Work Programme. In addition:

(a) Any Member wishing to be involved in the planned Recruitment and Retention Spotlight Review should contact the Chair or Scrutiny Officer.

(b) A new short term Budget Monitoring Group was also planned, and the Scrutiny Officer would share arrangements for this shortly.

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Children's Social Care Performance

(Councillor Leadbetter attended in accordance with Standing Order 25(1) and spoke to this item)

The Committee received the Children's Social Care Performance Dashboard, which had been reviewed following feedback from Scrutiny Members. The revised dashboard was now consistent with the same methodology Ofsted used to visualise the data and direction of travel in the Children's Services Analysis Tool.

The Report outlined the following key points:-

- Referral rates had reduced in December to 385 and overall the rate of referrals over the last 12 months in Devon was now below the national average, but higher than statistical neighbours.
- Assessments performance had continued to improve to 91% in December.
- The number of Section 47 child protection enquiries per 10,000 had reduced during December.
- Children in Care numbers increased in December, but remained lower than the national and statistical neighbour averages.
- Average caseloads had reduced to 16.5 children in December compared to 18.7 in August 2022.

Lengthy discussion followed with Members and Officers and included:

- Service priority was the need to improve accommodation for 17-18 year olds, and to improve care planning for this cohort to ensure they were in education, employment or training (EET) and Officers confirmed they were liaising with other relevant service areas of the Council to help with this.
- Department for Education advice had been sought on care experienced young people and a review of the service area was to be undertaken.
- Members voiced concern at the number of vulnerable care leavers who were in unsuitable accommodation; and also the current consultation on possible funding cuts to the YMCA. It was questioned why Children's and Adult Services data could not be shared to ensure adequate provision was available on transition.
- Although it was clarified that homeless young people were the responsibility of District Councils, rather than the County Council, Members viewed this as a joint responsibility involving all agencies working together.
- Recruitment and retention was discussed and Members remained concerned at the high level of agency workers – this was due to be considered further at the forthcoming Scrutiny spotlight review.
- A quality performance framework had just been introduced and would be reported on in due course.
- Members requested feedback on what the referral thresholds were in Devon, and Officers would share with the Committee at a future date the focussed work being undertaken by the Safeguarding Partnership

on the 'front door' of social care and a shared understanding of the issues.

- The geographical and cultural variance of service areas – Officers reported that work was being done to bring areas up to a common standard.
- Officers confirmed there were currently 10 young people in unregistered placements, some within the County and some further afield; they were met with weekly, and commissioning partners carried out safeguarding checks.

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

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- (a) Raises concerns about the support and accommodation for care leavers, and recognising the ongoing consultation asks the Cabinet to carefully consider future plans and the impact of any changes.
- (b) Raises concerns about the 52% of social workers being agency workers, a significant rise from the data previously reported to the Committee.
- (c) Adds an item to the work programme on threshold levels and referrals for the front door of Children's Social Care.

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Ofsted Monitoring Visit

The Ofsted letter summarised the findings of the monitoring visit to Devon Children's Services on 6 and 7 December 2022. This had been the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority had been judged inadequate in January 2020.

Areas covered by the visit were a review of the progress made in the quality and impact of services for children in care, including disabled children. Inspectors had a particular focus on the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Permanence planning for children.
- The experiences and progress of children living in unregulated and/or unregistered provision.
- The experiences and progress of disabled children in care.
- Strategic oversight and grip on areas for improvement and oversight by senior leaders, including of case audits and supervision.

The letter detailed the headline findings and evaluation of progress, finally noting that the continued lack of certainty around senior leadership arrangements for children's services and about the future structure, ethos and

direction of travel created vulnerability in the already slow pace of change to services for children in Devon.

Members' discussion and Officer responses to the Ofsted letter included:

- Officers shared concern as stated in the letter that the majority of children did not have strong engagement with their social worker, and that this was an area being worked on.
- Another area being worked on was support for families in taking back care leavers through the care system.
- As to supervision records not referencing the audit outcomes from the child's viewpoint – the audit programme was being refreshed to shape and improve practice.
- The pressure on social workers and the aim to reduce the amount of bureaucracy was a difficult balancing act.
- Members were very supportive of a therapeutic approach to help children understand their lives and situations.
- Members were keen to have a vision statement or action plan on the progress being made against the Children's Social Care Improvement Plan.

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Devon Local Area SEND Improvement Plan

The Improvement Plan was in response to the Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission revisit to the area between 23 and 25 May 2022, and was to decide whether sufficient progress had been made in addressing each of the areas of significant weakness, identified in the inspection in December 2018.

The Improvement Plan was to be monitored by the Department for Education and NHS England and was intended to focus specifically on improvements in four areas of weakness:

1. The fact that strategic plans and the local area's SEND arrangements are not embedded or widely understood by stakeholders, including schools, settings, staff and parents.
2. The significant concerns that were reported about communication with key stakeholders, particularly with parents and families.
3. The time it takes to issue EHC plans and the variable quality of these plans.
4. Weaknesses in the identification, assessment, diagnosis and support of those children and young people with autism spectrum disorder.

Discussion included:

- Members would find it helpful to know what thresholds were being looked at to give a clear direction for the future.
- Key Performance Indicators were being reviewed to reduce milestones, in particular Members referred to the '75% Professionals understand

the arrangements for children and young people with SEND by Sept 2023'.

- Of the 1600 backlog of EHC plans, 300 were waiting for service activity and 1,000 were waiting for school activity.
- Concern at the high number of school exclusions and the need for schools to be fully inclusive to support children with SEN and other needs.
- There was a funded pilot scheme in place to recruit an additional 10 key workers who would be able to provide support to families on the waiting list for an autism assessment, and Officers would report back to the Committee on this.

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

RESOLVED that the Children's Scrutiny Committee:

- (a) Welcomes the opportunity to be sighted on the Devon Local Area SEND Improvement Plan and supports the overall aims of the plan.
- (b) Is committed to working with the Cabinet Member, Senior Leaders and partners to meet the aims and goals of the plan to improve services and support for children, young people and families.
- (c) Recognises the huge challenges that this Council and the Local Area faces in improving SEND services, notwithstanding the historic underfunding in Education in the South West and the Council's predicted £127m SEND deficit by the end of this financial year.
- (d) Looks forward to the Cabinet Member and Senior Leaders updating the Committee on the progress of the plan at future meetings.

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Direct Payments Policy and Short Breaks Strategy

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

RESOLVED that this item be deferred to the Children's Standing Overview Group meeting on Tuesday 18 April.

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

The Meeting started at 10.30 am and finished at 1.40 pm