

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

19 September 2023

Present:

Councillors S Aves (Chair), P Sanders (Vice-Chair), T Adams, J Brazil, P Bullivant, C Channon, L Hellyer, P Maskell, M Squires, J Trail BEM and C Mabin (Church of England Diocesan representative)

Apologies:

Councillors J Bradford and I Hall

Members attending in accordance with Standing Order 25:

Councillors F Biederman, A Leadbetter and L Samuel

* 101 **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed the following:

- (a) The return of Ms C Mabin to the Committee, as the Church of England co-opted representative.
- (b) Councillor J Trail BEM in place of Councillor L Samuel who had taken on Cabinet Member responsibility for Children's SEND Improvement Services.
- (c) New Officers in Children's Services, attending the Committee for the first time today.

* 102 **Minutes**

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 6 June 2023 be signed as a correct record.

* 103 **Items Requiring Urgent Attention**

There was no matter raised as a matter of urgency.

* 104 **Public Participation**

In accordance with the Council's Public Participation Rules, the Committee received and acknowledged oral representations made by Caroline Bolingbroke, Holly Greenberry Pullen, Fiona Salter, Lucy Wilson and Elaine Davis-Kimble, on behalf of Devon SEND Parents and Carers for Change, on a

matter to be considered by the Committee that day, namely Item 9 Update on Devon's Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Improvement Plan. Their representations addressed the concerns they had around the SEND Improvement Plan.

The Chair responded by thanking them for their attendance and representations, which would be taken into account by the Committee during its subsequent deliberations. The Chair stated it was important for their views to be heard by Officers and the Committee and requested that their full written representations be sent to the Scrutiny Officer.

* **105** **Responses of the Cabinet to Reports of the Committee**

(Councillor Leadbetter attended in accordance with Standing Order 25(1) and spoke to this item at the invitation of the Committee.)

Councillor Leadbetter provided a brief update on Cabinet responses to the Committee's reports including:

- Welcomed the 18.4% budget increase in Children's Services, recognising however it was a one-off increase.
- Things were improving, with a new Director and Deputy of Children's Services, SEND Improvement Director and Heads of Service now in place.
- Councillor Samuel was the new Cabinet Member, whose focus would be on Children's SEND Improvement Services.
- Explanation of the safety valve intervention and that discussions with Government relating to this were ongoing.
- Work was ongoing to reduce the cost of agency staff and to try and secure a permanent workforce.
- In-year savings would be by way of efficiency savings rather than cuts.

* **106** **Scrutiny Committee Work Programme**

The Scrutiny Officer updated the Committee as to the Work Programme reminding Members of the Family Hubs Standing Overview Group meeting next week, 26 September, although it was noted that there would be an Ofsted monitoring visit on 26/27 September.

The Committee's Special Advisor suggested inviting School leaders, the ICB and strategic leaders across Health services to future meetings of the Committee to enrich discussion.

* **107** **Election of Domestic Sexual Violence and Abuse (DSVA) Champion**

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Public Health, Communities and Equality wished to seek nominations for a Domestic Violence and Sexual

Abuse Member Champion on each of the three Scrutiny Committees in order to better support the Council's responses across its services.

Councillor Samuel had held this role previously and the Chair expressed her thanks to Councillor Samuel for her work to date.

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

RESOLVED that Councillor Maskell be elected as Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Member Champion for the ensuing year in place of Councillor Samuel.

* 108

Children's Social Care Performance Report

(Councillor Leadbetter attended in accordance with Standing Order 25(1) and spoke to this item at the invitation of the Committee.)

The Committee received the Children's Social Care Performance Report, which set out the Quarter 1 performance for 2023/24, covering key areas as follows:

- Data changes in Referrals, Assessments, Child Protection, Children in Care, Care Experienced Young People and Workforce.
- Peer reviews and learning
- Department for Education visit on 27/28 June 2023
- Improvement Plan 2023/24
- Front Door Design
- Strategic Quality Performance Review Meeting (QPRM)
- Recruitment and Retention
- Practice Quality Assurance (Audit Framework)
- The next six months

It was noted there would be a further Ofsted monitoring visit next week in relation to the Care Leaver services.

Officers reported on feedback received from the Peer Reviews that included:

- There were a large number of Early Help teams leaving potential for duplication and for children to slip through; there were multiple referral points into teams and a lack of co-ordination when working out how to meet needs.
- The Council needed to strengthen performance information and Quality Assurance
- The service was looking at a new Family Hub model and expansion of family intervention teams to provide more intense Early Help and universal support, to include social care, health, public health and midwifery.

- Decision-making at the front door was largely safe.
- There was good partnership working, but needed to ensure good information sharing.
- Social workers had warm, tenacious conversations with families, but needed to be clearer about next steps or what services could best meet their needs.
- Systems and processes were complicated.
- The service was in the process of reviewing the operating model for the front door.
- The need to develop a clear Early Help offer, understood by families and partners so that families can self-serve or partners can direct them to the right service.

Questions and discussion points with Members and Officers included:

- Reassurance that the Family Hub model would provide partnership services to meet early intervention needs, to include working with difficult to reach communities, as yet to be fully scoped and consulted upon. The Cabinet Member stressed the importance of placing the Family Hubs in the right locations.
- Further narrative was requested on the data (p.3), which Officers agreed to include in future reports; and also the direction of recruitment figures.
- It was planned to reduce the number of agency social workers over the next two years in line with the national average (18%).
- Social care teams had been reorganised into smaller teams to enable better practice and supervision.
- Extensive discussions had taken place with District partners on working together to provide better permanent housing options for care experienced young people.
- Work was ongoing to improve and strengthen permanency plans for children; and some quality assurance work around those plans would be undertaken shortly.
- There were not any homeless Care Experienced young people, only those designated in unsuitable accommodation, i.e. temporary, not their own. Work was ongoing to improve the quality of supported accommodation.
- The audit framework had been developed to look at the quality of the practice and the outcomes for children and families. A knowledge base had been collated since April of this year.
- Assurance that children awaiting a Child Protection Conference were known to the social worker team and safeguarded where necessary.

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

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- (a) welcomes the commitments of the Cabinet Member on Family Hubs and invites the Cabinet Member to report back at a later stage on this and

welcomes improvements to the percentage of Children in Care with a permanency plan;

- (b) raises its concerns about details on partnership working on securing permanency homes for children in care;
- (c) asks for future performance reports to provide further narrative on the work behind the data and figures and evidence of better outcomes to appraise Members; and
- (d) agrees to set up a future task group to seek user feedback from children and families on our social care services.

* 109 **Update on Devon's Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) Improvement Plan**

(Councillor Samuel attended in accordance with Standing Order 25(1) and spoke to this item at the invitation of the Committee.)

The Committee received the Report of the Director of Children and Young People's Futures (CS/23/12), which provided an update on the SEND Improvement Plan. The Report set out a revised approach to enable system wide change; the progress made since the last Committee and actions to be delivered before the next Committee meeting.

The new Cabinet Member for SEND Improvement Services, Councillor Samuel, looked forward to working with the SEND Team to take forward and focus on the hard work required.

Questions and discussions points with Members and Officers included:

- The importance of timely engagement, not only with partner services, but with families and young people to drive forward the required change and improvement.
- Governance arrangements had improved. In addition to the Programme Board, there was now a Strategic Partnership Board consisting of senior leaders and would be the accountable body to drive forward improvements and be responsible for Ofsted and the safety valve.
- The Improvement Plan would be refreshed to become more dynamic and RAG rated.
- Officers would revert to Members on the costs and numbers of Tribunals; and the Scrutiny Officer would investigate possible attendance.
- The deep dive review to be undertaken of statutory assessment processes would look at the whole system from start to finish and the conclusions thereof fed back to the Committee.

- The very low percentage (11.8%) of EHC assessments completed in 20 weeks was due to Early Help support offers not being in place, but it was aimed to see improvements from the Spring term.
- Members requested the number of staff taking part in the Restorative Practice training and the impact it has had in practice.
- Officers suggested it would be helpful for the Committee to also engage with partner services at Committee meetings to discuss the challenges faced.
- Members stressed the importance of hearing first-hand accounts from the speakers this morning.
- The importance of consulting with Devon SEND Parents and Carers for Change and Parent Carer Forum Devon on the new SEND Strategy.

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

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- (a) supports the Council's revised approach to improvement to enable system wide change, as recommended by the SEND Task Group in November 2022;
- (b) asks the Cabinet Member to commit to and take a proactive role to ensure that children and families' voices are heard across the system, involving the Committee when appropriate;
- (c) invites the Cabinet Member to attend the Committee on 14 November 2023 to report back on the implementation of the Improvement Programme, the completion of the actions set out in this report and an update on Education Health and Care Plans; and
- (d) will invite key local area partners to the next meeting.

* **110** **Electively Home Educated (EHE) and Children Missing Education (CME)**

The Committee received the Report of the Director of Children's Service and Head of Education and Learning (CS/23/13), which provided an overview of the 2022/23 academic year for students identified as EHE and CME. The Committee were asked to review:

- (a) the draft Annual Report for Elective Home Education 2022/23;
- (b) the data relating to Children Missing Education 2022/23; and
- (c) support proposals to review CME and EHE Policy and resources through the Autumn term.

The Report demonstrated the increasing call on limited resources to support learners who were EHE and CME.

Questions and discussions with Members and Officers included:

- Request that Cabinet write to Ofsted seeking tighter regulations for EHE, specifically in terms of safeguarding.
- Wider issues were around the Inclusion system as a whole, across all types of schools, where secondary numbers were high. Officers confirmed safeguarding was their overarching responsibility.
- Safeguarding and quality of education checks were carried out, but resources were limited, and further detail had been requested on these checks to ensure a focus on safeguarding.
- A Fair Access Panel had been set up (to include schools), which could fast track children back into school. Further engagement with schools was also taking place through various forums.
- Members were concerned at the high numbers showing as reasons for EHE, particularly Mental Health (774) and Unknown (512).

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

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- (a) raises its concerns with the rising numbers and reasons for Children Missing Education and Elective Home Education;
- (b) welcomes plans to review Children Missing Education and Elective Home Education Policy and resources and welcomes the opportunity to be consulted on the review; and
- (c) asks the Cabinet Member to write to Ofsted to lobby for better regulation and oversight to safeguard Children Missing Education and Electively Home Educated and ensuring relevant costs are recovered.

* 111

Children's Scrutiny Social Care Visits Report

The Committee received the Report of the Children's Scrutiny Committee on the Social Care Visits to front-line staff that had taken place across the County this year, including recommendations to Cabinet. The Chair wished to thank everyone involved in the visits.

It was noted that the Bridges team had been put forward as finalists for the Social Worker of the Year Awards in the Team of the Year category.

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

RESOLVED:

1. That the Committee commends this report to Cabinet for Cabinet to consider this report and its findings as part of the Council's improvement journey in Children's Services.

2. That Cabinet has due consideration of the following key points and responds to the Committee at a future meeting with a response about how they will be addressed:
- (a) the need to continue to recruit permanent staff across services;
 - (b) support from staff for increasing the Council's in-house provision of accommodation for children in our care;
 - (c) support from staff to in their feedback to work with District Councils and make care leavers exempt from council tax across Devon;
 - (d) support from staff in their feedback to work with District Councils and Devon Home Choice to ensure care leavers are automatically placed in Band B for priority of accommodation;
 - (e) support from staff to the provision of in-house mental health services due to rise in need and to ensure timely access to mental health professionals for children and young people;
 - (f) support amongst staff for motion passed by the Council on 7 September 2023 to treat care experienced young people as a protected characteristic; and
 - (g) recognising the important work of Bridges, Cabinet's continued support for the service, and consideration of expanding the service to support more families.

* 112 **Children's Standing Overview Group**

The Committee received the two reports from the Children's Scrutiny Committee Standing Overview Group held on 22 June 2023 and 17 July 2023.

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

The Meeting started at 10.32 am and finished at 1.40 pm