

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

14 November 2023

Present:-

Councillors S Aves (Chair), P Sanders (Vice-Chair), T Adams, J Bradford, J Brazil, P Bullivant, I Hall, P Maskell, J Trail BEM, J Wilton-Love and C Mabin (Church of England Diocesan representative)

Councillors C Channon, L Hellyer and M Squires (virtual presence)

Apologies:-

Councillors F Letch MBE

Members attending in accordance with Standing Order 25

Councillors A Leadbetter and L Samuel

* 113 **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed Mrs Mayes to the meeting who was attending in her capacity as a Co-opted Member of the Council's Standards Committee to observe and monitor compliance with the Council's ethical governance framework.

* 114 **Minutes**

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 19 September 2023 be signed as a correct record.

* 115 **Items Requiring Urgent Attention**

There was no matter raised as a matter of urgency.

* 116 **Public Participation**

In accordance with the Council's Public Participation Rules, the Committee received and acknowledged oral representations made by Ms V Leonard on a matter to be considered by the Committee that day, namely an update on Devon's SEND Improvement.

The Chairman responded, thanking Ms Leonard for her attendance and representations, which would be taken into account by the Committee during its subsequent deliberations.

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

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

Councillor Hall declared a personal interest by virtue of being co-chair of One Eastern Devon Partnership and a member of the Eastern Locality Mental Health Partnership Group.

Councillors Leadbetter (Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools) provided a brief update on Cabinet responses to the Committee's reports including:

Social Care Visits:

- The Cabinet considered the Committee's report on Social Care site visits at its meeting on 8 November and accepted the recommendations.
- A new HR partner would be joining Children's Services to assist with the recruitment of permanent staff; and adverts were running for required permanent posts.
- As agreed at full Council, care experienced young people would now be given protected characteristic status.
- The Bridges Team were congratulated on having been awarded the Team of the Year Award at the national Social Worker of the Year Awards, in recognition of all their good work.
- Work was ongoing with District colleagues regarding housing accommodation for looked after children and children in care.
- A lot of work was also ongoing relating to the MASH service to ensure the service had the best front door; and Ofsted had indicated this area would be their next inspection.
- Issues with Eclipse continued to be worked on.

Corporate Parenting Board:

Had now reorganised into five subgroups, each chaired by a Cabinet Member, reporting back to the main Board: Talented Me; Healthy Me; Care for Me; Involve Me; and Welcome and Support Me.

Ofsted letter:

This would be an item for the next Committee meeting, although the Committee had been circulated a copy of the letter. Councillor Leadbetter recommended everyone attended the Total Respect Training delivered by our care leavers when it was rolled out.

Family Hubs:

Contract negotiations continued with Action for Children; and work continued on where the focus on buildings and staff would be.

Post-16 Accommodation:

Staff recruitment was underway, and close working continued with District Councils to secure housing and accommodation.

Young carers and mental health:

Active work was ongoing with these Contracts.

Councillor Samuel (Cabinet Member for Children's SEND Improvement Services) had circulated to Members a brief update and added that:

- Work was ongoing to further reduce staff caseloads and the Service were working with Essex County Council in this regard.
- Communication was part of the SEND Transformation Programme and was being worked on currently.
- She would be liaising with her counterparts at Plymouth City Council and Somerset County Council.

* 118 **Scrutiny Committee Work Programme**

The Scrutiny Officer updated the Committee as to the Work Programme:

It was noted that items relating to SEND and Social Care would now alternate between meetings to allow partner attendance and more in depth discussion.

It was agreed to add Family Hubs, Mental Health in Schools and Member/Community engagement to the Work Programme.

Suggestions for future visits to schools and frontline staff were welcomed from Members, as well as any other areas of interest.

* 119 **In-year Budget Position**

(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 Report of the Chief Officer for Children and Young People's Futures (CS/23/20), which set out the key budget issues for the Service identifying risks and actions to mitigate.

As at September 2023 the Service had a budget of £206.5 million, excluding the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) funding and the pressures experienced within the High Needs Block. The budget stated did include the additional in-year savings target of £2.9 million, of which £2.1 million was against Social Care and £819,000 against Education. The forecast position was an overspend of £9.3 million.

In summary, this was a challenging time for the Council and for the Service: In Children's Social Care and Wellbeing, budget pressures had to be balanced

against the need to implement service improvements. The underlying principles of the DSG management plan was to ensure that the needs of children and young people with SEND were met earlier and that there was sufficient provision to meet current and future demands. Increased levels of need in schools and settings continued and this was placing greater demands on education services.

Discussion and questions followed and included:

- Clarity that foster caring was a key and important part of the sufficiency pathway.
- The planned work to develop an Early Help service.
- The volatility in the staffing and placement landscape impacting plans to meet the in-year savings target of £2.1 million in Social Care.
- Improvement Board information on the action plan would be shared with the Committee.
- Officers undertook to respond to Councillor Trail with what the 'lost revenue from non-trading (666,000)' under overspends within Education, related to.

The Chair proposed that a budget monitoring group be set up to consider the budget throughout the year, which would report back to the Committee.

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

RESOLVED that a Budget Monitoring Standing Overview Group be set up to include Councillors Aves, Bullivant, Maskell, Sanders and Trail.

* 120 **Update on Devon's SEND Improvement**

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

(Councillor Sanders declared a personal interest by virtue of being a Director and Trustee of the Dartmoor Multi-Academy Trust)

Also in attendance to enable wider partner discussion were:

Suzanne Smart, Deputy Director of Commissioning Out of Hospital NHS Devon
Keith Bennett (Marland School) representing Special Schools
Paul Walker (First Federation) representing Primary Schools
Fay Bowler (virtual) (Braunton Academy) representing Secondary Schools

The Committee received the Report of the Director of Children & Young People's Futures (CS/23/19), which provided an update on education health and care needs assessment (EHCNA) and planning processes, as requested by Members at the previous Committee meeting.

In summary, the data showed that Devon was outlier in relation to requests for EHCNA and the number of children and young people supported through an EHCP, suggesting that at a system level, Devon's approach to meeting a range of needs at the earliest opportunity and the view of 'significantly greater difficulty in learning' might differ from other areas. Developing the educational offer in mainstream schools and settings to improvement inclusion and ensure that the needs of children and young people with SEND were met earlier was of critical importance.

The delivery of the local area's statutory process was not good enough and the approach to date had not had the desired impact. Reviewing the service improvement approach and undertaking a complete review of SEN statutory processes was critical and underway, including improving communications.

Members' questions and discussion points included:

- As part of the SEND Transformation Programme, a new quality assurance framework was being developed to strengthen the quality assurance process for EHCPs, with support from Essex County Council (funded by the Department for Education).
- Officers undertook to provide early years data on the number of children starting school following Covid. It was noted there had been a spike in speech and language in early years following Covid, but it was too soon to know if this was an ongoing trend.
- Those refused a 6-week assessment were referred back to the school to receive further SEN support; and an analysis was requested to identify any particular groups of children.
- Agreement on the significant change in transition from primary to secondary schools.
- Officers confirmed that data relating to exclusions and suspensions was shared with schools across the County.
- Good governance and performance was seen as key to improved communication.
- The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools reported having met recently with the Minister for Children and Families requesting additional school funding; Members in addition proposed writing to the Minister in this regard; and Officers also encouraged Members and school leaders to write to their MPs requesting support for additional funding.
- Members requested further information for the Committee on the mental health support that was provided for schools.

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

RESOLVED that the Committee write to the Secretary of State for Education and the Minister for Children and Families and Devon MPs requesting additional funding for schools.

* 121 **Children's Services Recruitment and Retention Spotlight Review**

The Committee considered the report of the Spotlight Review on Children's Services Recruitment and Retention held on 26 July 2023, which detailed the findings and recommendations of the Spotlight Review.

The Children's Scrutiny Committee had previously completed a Social Work Workforce Recruitment and Retention Spotlight Review in December 2020. In November 2022, the SEND Task Group concluded and found recruitment and retention challenges in the SEND and Education teams and recommended a follow-up Spotlight Review on recruitment and retention be completed in order to look into any further recommendations that could be made to support Children's Services achieving a stable, permanent workforce.

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

RESOLVED

- (a) that the Recruitment and Retention Spotlight Review report be commended to the Cabinet;
- (b) that Cabinet be asked to endorse and take action on the 12 recommendations contained in the report;
- (c) that in response, Cabinet be asked to agree a recommendations action plan detailing how and when any agreed recommendations will be enacted; and
- (d) that Cabinet be asked to report back to this Committee in June 2024 on progress made against the recommendations.

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

The Meeting started at 10.30 am and finished at 1.12 pm