

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17 March 2025

Present:-

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

Present remotely:-

Councillors A Dewhirst and J Brazil

Apologies:-

Councillors R Radford and J Wilton-Love

Members attending in accordance with Standing Order 25

Councillors A Leadbetter, J McInnes and L Samuel

* 201 **Announcements**

The Chair welcomed Mr I Hipkin to the meeting who attended in his capacity as a Co-opted Member of the Council's Standards Committee to observe and monitor compliance with the Council's ethical governance framework.

* 202 **Declarations of Interest**

The Chair reminded Members they should declare any interests they may have in any item to be considered, prior to any discussion taking place on that item. [A list of county councillors who are also district, borough, city, parish or town councillors.](#)

* 203 **Minutes**

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the two meetings held on 28 January 2025 signed as correct records.

* 204 **Items Requiring Urgent Attention**

There was no matter raised as a matter of urgency.

* 205 **Public Participation**

In accordance with the Council's Public Participation Rules, the Committee received and acknowledged oral representations made by Mr Hayes Rees on

the Improvement and Social Care Performance report at item 10 on the Agenda.

The Chair responded, thanking Mr Hayes Rees for his attendance and representations which would be taken into account by the Committee during its subsequent deliberations.

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

Councillor Samuel, the Cabinet Member for Children's SEND Improvement Services, reported on her attendance at the recent f40 Conference on Fairer Funding. The main speaker at the event was Dame Christine Lenehan, the Government Strategic Advisor on SEND. Councillor Samuel stated that the anticipated document on reforms was expected by the summer, and that she would circulate the presentation slides to Members once received.

* **207** **Scrutiny Committee Work Programme**

The Scrutiny Officer reported this was the last meeting of the current Council, the next meeting being scheduled for 12 June 2025. He confirmed that a Standing Overview Group on the Inclusion and Learning Strategy was still to be scheduled.

Members were asked to provide feedback on what had been successful and what had not, to help guide the work programme for the new Council term. There was also a handover document to be reviewed and Members were asked to email the Scrutiny Officer with anything they wished included.

208 **Ofsted Inspection Update**

The Interim Director of Children & Young People's Futures and the Chief Executive updated the Committee as to the Ofsted inspection as follows:

- Ofsted revisited Devon's Children's Social Care Services in January, with feedback submitted and discussions ongoing. If not published by 25 March 2025, the report would be delayed until after local elections. Expected findings aligned with prior expectations, though challenges remained in recruitment and care accommodation.
- The Strategic Partnership Board continued its work, bringing together partners for improvement efforts, and recent discussions included joint multi-agency training focused on neglect, tailored by locality.
- The Chief Executive met with the Commissioner biweekly to review progress. During these visits the Commissioner would engage with frontline colleagues and conduct ongoing assessments. The Commissioner also met regularly with the Director of Children & Young People's Futures and Cabinet leaders.

* 209

Children's Services Improvements and Social Care Performance Measures

The Committee received the Report of the Director of Children and Young People's Futures (CS/25/11) which requested Members to consider the contents of the Performance Board report provided to the March 2025 meeting of the Improvement Partnership Board.

The Improvement Partnership Board monitored the implementation of the Social Care Improvement Plan at its monthly meetings, including consideration of the key performance measures agreed for the Children's Service Improvement Plan 2025.

The Performance report set out the 19 key performance indicators agreed by the Improvement Partnership Board and highlighted those where there had been an update to the indicator.

Responses to questions and discussion points with Officers and Members included:

- KPI 6 highlighted children returning to care plan due to prior ineffective interventions, with improved practices and expanded early help services now in place. In the North, staffing instability, rural access, and complex needs drove threshold inconsistencies, but efforts were focused on stabilisation.
- Acknowledged that while improvement since 2023 had progressed, more focus on sufficiency, such as adequate children's homes and care leaver accommodation, was needed. Efforts were ongoing with extra capacity and collaborations with partners to address challenges and support young people effectively.
- Concerns were raised about regression in key performance indicators particularly around re-referrals, timeliness of assessments, and the impact of Section 47 enquiries on families. Officers stated that efforts were focused on improving early help services, enhancing partnerships, and reducing unnecessary interventions, with an overall trend of progress despite fluctuations.
- Managers were working to balance priorities, ensuring critical training was prioritised without overwhelming staff.
- Effective teams were not dismantled to address challenges in other areas, instead, good practices were shared through workshops, performance reviews and staff sessions to spread expertise.
- Progress was being made, with some 'good' audits and an 'outstanding' one reflecting ongoing improvement, noting the transition to consistently 'good' practice would take time.

- Call for stronger collaboration between system leaders, e.g. NHS, Police, through joint training and engagement.

The discussion highlighted the challenges faced over the past year, emphasising the importance of teamwork and collaboration among district colleagues and staff to address complex issues. Recognition and feedback for Team Devon were noted as key aspects to improve outcomes. The new Council were encouraged to ask detailed questions and explore specific areas to gain a deeper understanding of challenges and hold accountability.

8 210 Corporate Parenting Strategic Board

(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 Director of Children and Young People's Futures (CS/25/12) on the Corporate Parenting Strategic Board – Impact of New Arrangements.

The report provided an update on the impact of the changes to the Corporate Parenting Strategic Board (CPSB) which were initiated in September 2023 and endorsed by the Children's Scrutiny Committee on 25 March 2024.

The report set out next steps and key priorities for the next 12 months for each of thematic subgroups, aligned to the Children Services Improvement Plan and Ofsted ILACS feedback.

Response to questions and discussion points with Members and Officers included:

- The safeguarding of children placed in Devon was effectively managed. While the originating local authority retained responsibility as the corporate parent, Devon provided support and shared relevant information when appropriate.
- Efforts were underway, including collaboration with the virtual school to address attendance gaps for the 5% of children in care missing education due to challenges like placements outside of Devon or EHCP complexities.
- Work was underway to encourage more children to utilise free dental visits, with Public Health examining barriers to access, and exploring greater convenience for carers was a focus area.
- Members were reassured that Devon's children in care were safeguarded, highlighting regular collaboration with the police, with weekly review meetings, ensuring ongoing assessment and reassurance.

- The decision to exempt young people from paying Council Tax in Devon was welcomed.

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

RESOLVED that the Committee:

(a) continue to endorse the refreshed Corporate Parenting Strategic Board structure, following its move to a Champion Model endorsed in January 2024 due to the positive impact this is now starting to have on Children in Care and Care Leavers; and

(b) expresses gratitude to all those involved with the Board, with special appreciation for the voices of the young people.

* 211

Fostering Task Group - Progress on Recommendations

The Committee received the Report of the Director of Children and Young People's Futures (CS/25/13) on the Fostering Task Group.

The Fostering Task Group had undertaken a review of the fostering service between July and September 2024, presenting their report and recommendations to the Committee in November 2024. Cabinet had agreed the proposed responses to the Task Group recommendations in January 2025.

This report provided an update on the implementation of the recommendations of the Fostering Task Group.

Questions, responses and discussion points with Members and Officers included:

- Expense claim delays had occurred due to the need for multi-manager sign-offs, however streamlining the process aimed to reduce these delays.
- There was a strong desire for foster carers to have a voice in shaping the service's future, and regular engagement was encouraged.
- Alternatives to Egress for secure storage of foster care-related documents were being explored, with a solution expected soon.
- An emphasis on ensuring support and training for Special Guardians and Kinship Carers, as their needs were often under-represented.
- Discussions were ongoing to explore IT options as part of a broader support package for foster carers.

The Committee extended its gratitude to the foster carers for their time and valuable insights, as well as to Officers and Cabinet Members.

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

RESOLVED that the Committee welcomes:

- (a) Cabinet's acceptance or partial acceptance of 11 of the Fostering Task Group's recommendations.
- (b) requests a further update on progress against the recommendations is added to the Work Programme for September 2025.
- (c) involvement in future upcoming regular meetings with Foster Carers and Children's Services.
- (d) recommends the appointment of a Fostering Member Champion in the new Council's Children's Scrutiny Committee to act as a link between Foster Parents and the Council and to ensure sustained progress in Fostering Services.

* **212** **Children's Scrutiny Social Care Visits - Progress on Recommendations**

The Committee received the Report of the Director of Children and Young People's Futures (CS/25/10) on Children's Social Care Visits – Progress on Recommendations.

Members of the Committee had undertaken, several visits to Children's Social Care Services during 2023 and 2024. Arising out of the 2023 visits were a series of recommendations that had been reported to Cabinet in November 2023. An update was provided to the Committee in March 2024 and this report provided a further update on the responses of the service to those recommendations arising out of the 2024 visits.

Key points highlighted included:

- The Council Tax exemption applied until the age of 25.
- There was a national requirement for regions to implement an agency price cap by the Autumn of 2025, but it would be introduced in the South West region from 1 April 2025.
- The Safeguarding Partnership would be monitoring the Section 47 child protection enquiries going forward.

The Committee expressed its thanks to all Members and Officers for the improvement and progress of the recommendations.

* **213** **Scrutiny Champion Against Domestic Violence & Sexual Abuse**

The Committee's Champion against Domestic Violence & Sexual Abuse, Councillor Maskell, provided an update as follows:

- 28,000 children in Devon had been impacted by domestic abuse in 2024, with over 4,000 referrals to Children's front door services.
- Key concerns remained peer-to-peer harm and misogynistic online influence. The Netflix drama Adolescence was recommended watching.
- Launch of the Devon Domestic Abuse Alliance and deployment of domestic abuse workers in four localities by April.
- Collaborative efforts with schools, police and community services to address domestic abuse comprehensively.

* 214 **Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Group**

The Committee received the Report of the Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Group meeting that took place on 18 February 2025.

It was **MOVED** by Councillor Adams, **SECONDED** by Councillor Peart and **RESOLVED** that the report be accepted as an accurate record of the meeting.

* 215 **Children's Scrutiny Committee End of Year Report**

The Committee's Quadrennial Report 2021-2025 was received, which covered the work and impact of the Children's Scrutiny Committee over the course of the quadrennial term May 2021-May 2025.

The Chief Executive expressed her thanks to the Committee on behalf of colleagues and hoped that changes made would ensure a more robust scrutiny function for Children's Services in the future.

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

The Meeting started at 10.30am and finished at 1.08pm