

## **Report of the Children's Standing Overview Group – December 2020**

### **1. Introduction**

The Children's Scrutiny Committee Standing Overview Group meets regularly throughout the year to consider key updates and pertinent issues from across Children's Services, with the aim of developing Members knowledge and understanding, and bringing to the forefront any areas which may benefit from further scrutiny.

This report outlines the topics covered at the meeting of 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020, highlights the key points raised during discussion and details any agreed actions.

### **2. Attendance**

Councillors Rob Hannaford (Chair), Su Aves, Julian Brazil, Iain Chubb, Jonathan Hawkins, Linda Hellyer, Richard Hosking, Tony Inch, Philip Sanders, Andrew Saywell, Debo Sellis, Margaret Squires and Mrs Christina Mabin (Church of England)

Cabinet Member: Councillor James McInnes

Children's Services: Jo Olsson (Chief Officer for Children's Services), Dawn Stabb (Head of Education & Learning), Rachel Gillott (Acting Head of Children's Social Care), Fiona Fleming (Head of Commissioning – Children's Services), Vivien Lines (Improvement Director) and Kate Mulford (Commissioning Manager)

Department for Education: Eleanor Brazil (Children's Commissioner)

Children's Scrutiny Special Advisor: Kevin Crompton

Scrutiny Officer: Vicky Church

### **3. Notes and Actions**

#### **3.1 Self-Assessment and Self-Evaluation**

Jo Olsson, Chief Officer for Children's Services introduced the Self-Assessment and the Self-Evaluation. The Self-Assessment provides an up-to-date evaluation of the needs of children and families within Devon, effectiveness of current service provision and performance in improving outcomes for children and young people. As part of the South West Region annual programme of sector-led improvement, it also provides an opportunity to receive peer challenge within the region; share good practice; and identify regional priorities and programme of support for the coming year.

The Self-Evaluation is produced as part of the ILACS (Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services) framework and will inform the Ofsted Annual Conversation on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2021. This year's Self-Evaluation has been prepared with a consciousness that the 2019 Self-Evaluation

failed to bring to light the significant issues around support and accommodation for care leavers later highlighted through the March 2020 'inadequate' Ofsted judgement.

Fiona Fleming, Head of Commissioning, drew Members attention to the key areas of the Self-Assessment.

#### Progress on areas for improvement from the last self-assessment

- SEND (Special Educational Needs); significant progress has been made through the Written Statement of Action across all four key areas, including the timeliness of EHCPs (Education Health and Care Plans);
- Placement Stability; good progress has been made, although this area remains a key priority and is being taken forward through a refreshed Sufficiency Strategy;
- Outcomes for disadvantaged children (narrowing the gap); progress to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged children this year has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, but these issues are continuing to be addressed with Babcock and wider partners;
- Rate of teenage care entry; which saw a significant increase in the 6 months prior to the beginning of the pandemic (up 27%), but which has decreased by almost 15% since March; the Edge of Care service implemented from September 2020 is key part of the Council's continued response.

#### Regional Areas for Improvement Last year

- To improve the quality of practice; much work still to be done in this area, highlighted by this year's inadequate Ofsted judgement, but a great deal of activity is being taken forward to accelerate the necessary improvement;
- To develop a skilled and stable children's services workforce; while this has been achieved in the majority of areas, there has been a significant deterioration in the stability of the social work workforce; this is being addressed through the new Recruitment and Retention Strategy;
- To increase the effective management of demand and risk; being addressed through demand analysis and modelling, and risk assessments for all open social work cases throughout the pandemic.

#### Top Three Outcomes we are Proud of Achieving This Year

- Early Help; this has continually improved over the last year, received positive feedback from Ofsted and played a crucial role in the partnership's response to Covid-19;
- Partnership support for most vulnerable children during Covid-19 and lessons learned; achieved through the Children's Incident Management Team, processes supporting vulnerable children at school and innovative ways of working in Public Health Nursing;
- Improvement of EHCP timeliness and parental engagement; timeliness is above the national average.

Also outlined were the Top Four Outcomes We Need to Improve:

- The impact of leaders on social work practice;
- Identifying and responding to neglect;
- Support for care leavers;
- The lived experience of children with SEND – the transformation of SEND services;

and the Top Three Risks for the Future:

- Increased demand on Children's Services, resulting from the Covid-19 lockdown and the financial impact of public services;

- High-Needs Block Funding;
- Workforce instability and recruitment challenges, including social workers and health visitors.

Rachel Gillott, Acting Head of Children's Social Care, presented the Self-Evaluation highlighting the services key challenges and priorities going forward.

#### Key challenges

- Senior leadership changes;
- High rates of repeat child protection plans;
- High rates of adolescent care entry;
- Supporting care leavers with the most complex needs;
- Stabilising the frontline social work workforce;
- Confidence in answering the 'so what?' question; making sure we know what difference we are making in all areas.

#### Priorities for the next 12 months

- Sustaining improvement work; working effectively with children experiencing chronic neglect and with care leavers;
- Maintaining and embedding improvements in corporate parenting;
- Ensuring we understand the impact of our Edge of Care response;
- Evaluating the impact of practice improvement through effective quality assurance;
- Delivery of the Recruitment and Retention Strategy;
- Workforce development, including embedding Restorative Practice; delivering outstanding practitioners and managers for the future;
- Working with partners to minimise the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns on children and families;
- Ensure the financial stability of children's services.

Dawn Stabb, Head of Education and Learning highlighted the relevant areas from the Self-Assessment in terms Education and Early Help. Due to the pandemic, this years' Self-Assessment does not contain GCSE results, Key Stage 1 and 2 test results or Ofsted inspections outcomes as would usually be the case. The pandemic has however had a wide-ranging impact on children and families in Devon including considerably increases in free school meal claims, significant increases in youth unemployment and rises in demand for domestic abuse support.

A number of improvements to SEND support have been achieved through the WSOA including:

- Induction training, recognised as national good practice;
- A new Local Offer;
- SEND transformation programme;
- Stronger engagement with parents;
- Significant improvements in EHCP timeliness;
- 'Good' EHCP charter;
- Improved waiting times for Autism assessments and better pre and post diagnostic support.

For Children in Care, attendance figures are higher than the national average for all students and we have seen significant improvements in Key Stage 4 outcomes.

Early Help services have been a huge strength during the Covid-19 pandemic, playing a crucial role in the frontline delivery of the partnership response, providing broad multi-agency support for the most vulnerable children during the pandemic.

Further discussion was held around:

- The preference for children to be placed in foster care over residential care settings, but that this is not always possible due to insufficiency of suitable foster placements; children in residential settings are closely monitored by the Acting Head of Children's Social Care and suitable foster placements continue to be sought for them;
- The preference to work with local authorities across the peninsula to address issues around social worker pay and conditions, rather than create an overly competitive environment which can increase instability in the long term;
- Staff shortages in Public Health Nursing continue but there are strategies in place which are addressing this;
- The joint education and health strategy across the STP area on speech and language work and support; there is potential for Scrutiny to look at this in more detail;
- Life story work, which is well established for children in foster care and residential care; work is ongoing to embed this more consistently in the care leavers' service;
- Working with 'Outstanding' authorities to improve our own practice, while recognising Devon's unique needs and qualities;
- The Social Work in schools pilot, which Scrutiny may wish to examine in more detail.

### **3.2 Care Leaver Accommodation and Sufficiency**

Kate Mulford, Commissioning Manager provided Members with a presentation covering Care Leaver's Accommodation and Sufficiency. Key points included:

#### Care Leaver Accommodation

- Currently a range of services are provided which are meeting the needs of a large proportion of 16/17 year olds and care leavers, however there is small proportion of these young people with complex needs whose needs are not being met;
- Sufficiency of accommodation is not just about the provision of housing/buildings, it's about having the right support in place alongside this;
- There are ongoing partnerships with district colleagues and health partners to achieve this;
- Risks around unregulated housing (including supported living), as identified by the Children's Commissioner in her recent report are now being mitigated by robust quality assurance and contract monitoring arrangements;
- Supported living options are delivered through 14 contracted providers, 148 potential placements in supported lodgings and semi-independent supported accommodation;
- Homelessness prevention strategies are multi-agency and include work to stabilise tenancies and decrease the use of emergency accommodation; every young person in unsuitable accommodation is tracked weekly by managers to ensure immediate follow up and that actions are taken;
- The Market Development Plan is concentrating on four areas; young people who are considered to be 'high risk'; emergency placements; links to Early Help Pathway Planning and Children in Need services; and sufficiency of (and access to) available accommodation.

#### Sufficiency (children's residential care)

- 77% of Children in Care are currently in a fostering placement;

- Of those children who are in residential care placements, 86% have been placed in Devon or with neighbouring authorities;
- Quality Assurance is delivered through Ofsted Regulation, Quality Monitoring and Contract Management.

Further discussion was held around:

- The reasons behind children being placed in residential care outside of Devon, which can be due to the complexity of children's needs, but is very often sufficiency;
- Previous work with the residential care market, including many small, local residential care homes meant that children's services were able to respond well to arising needs during the pandemic;
- Currently the market is able to respond well to Devon's needs;
- Some delays to placements have been as a result of court delays; very few children have their placements delayed due to waiting for a care plan; a great deal of work is put into finding suitable placements prior to the court order so arrangements can be made immediately;
- Regular meetings are held with district colleagues (every 6 weeks) to address issues with 16/17 year old and care leaver accommodation;
- Supported living placements include family environments which are similar to foster care placements but which provide more independence for the young person; officers undertook to provide Members with more detail around types of supported living placements and other accommodation available to 16/17 year olds and care leavers;
- Concern raised by Members about the number of street attached young people in Exeter, which Scrutiny may wish to examine in more detail.

### **3.3 Next Meeting**

The next meeting of the Children's Standing Overview is scheduled for Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021.

**Councillor Rob Hannaford**  
**Chair of the Children's Scrutiny Committee**