

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

9 November 2021

Present:-

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

Apologies:-

Councillors G Gribble, J Hawkins, L Samuel and C Mabin (Church of England Representative)

Members attending in accordance with Standing Order 25

Councillor A Leadbetter

* 11 **Minutes**

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 7 September and the minutes from the 11 October Standing Over Group meeting, be signed as a correct record.

* 12 **Items Requiring Urgent Attention**

There was no matter raised as a matter of urgency.

* 13 **Public Participation**

There were no oral representations from members of the public.

* 14 **Scrutiny Committee Work Programme**

The Committee were updated as to the Scrutiny Work Programme and it was agreed that an SEND Task Group would be added.

* 15 **In-Year Budget Position**

The Committee received the In-Year Budget Briefing Report of the Chief Officer for Children's Services (CS/21/17) outlining those areas of specific pressures on the budget and on action being taken to address this. The Report highlighted that as of September 2021, the forecast position for Children's Services, including Public Health Nursing (PHN), was an overspend of £43.3m, which included the Dedicated Schools Grant deficit of £36 million. The greatest cost pressures related to the availability of suitable

provision for children coming into care, the reliance on agency staff pending impact of the Recruitment and Retention Strategy and the SEND High Needs Block.

The Dedicated Schools Grant was showing a deficit overspend of just over £36 million for this financial year after £2.8 million of management actions. This cumulative deficit was expected to be £85 million by the end of the 2021/22 financial year. The Council (and Government) recognised the national context of rapidly escalating demand and a legal framework that increased demand without the corresponding investment.

School transport continued to be an area of significant pressure due to marketplace failings driving up the costs above inflation and with the current pandemic it could place more pressure on contract providers in the long term. The current predicted overspend on the school transport budget for 2021-22 was £2.5 millions. This budget sat within Children's Services but the operational delivery sat within Planning, Transport and Environment (PTE).

Children's Social Care was forecast to overspend by just under £5 millions. Operationally, the staffing position remained challenging. However, Cabinet had approved the Recruitment and Retention Strategy in September of this year and several measures, such as more competitive salaries for experienced social workers combined with a retention payment provided an immediate incentive.

The number of children in care had slightly reduced from a high of 840 down to just over 800. The greatest areas of concern continued to be the number and cost of children's placements. The Sufficiency Strategy 2022-2024 "Finding a place to call home" sets out the plan to address these issues.

The budget for the Public Health Nursing Service was £10.5 million, of which £10.4 million was funded from the Public Health grant. The Service was forecast to underspend by £300,000, largely due to vacant nurses positions. 12 new starters were expected to join the Service in January 2022.

Members Discussion points included:

- How the shortage of bus drivers within Stagecoach, as well as coach operators ceasing to trade due to current climate, would be managed moving forward to ensure children could still get to school. Members were advised that whilst the budget for school transport sat with Children's Services, the operational delivery sat within Planning, Transportation and Environment services – this would be a challenge moving forward with the current market climate, however, the Transport Team had found the best value school transport routes; therefore the overspend could have been much higher. It was noted that every school run had continued throughout the Pandemic, however with the

rising fuel costs it was anticipated there would be a higher overspend next year.

- How Devon compared to other Local Authorities (LA) - Members were advised that LA's counted their spend in different ways so it would be difficult to compare an exact like for like. The High Needs Block funding was calculated on 2-18 years population, and Devon was currently 125th of 150th funding for high needs block at £589 per pupil (the average being £609; the highest LA received £1000 per head, and the lowest LA received £500 per head). It was explained that if Devon received just the average value per head, the Council would receive an additional £11m in funding per year.
- How and what funding was based on – it was explained that deprivation was used, however it was currently based on historical calculations.
- Plans to reduce the overall High Needs Block deficit, sat outside of the Council budgets until 2023.
- The Council was still awaiting the Government's SEND review report, which had been due in September 2020 but delayed due to the pandemic.
- Numbers of Free School Meals (FSM) had started to increase again, which was seen as positive as there had previously been a stigma around claiming FSMs from some parents in rural areas.
- The recruitment and retention of social workers continued to be problematic, especially given the housing emergency in the South West with less private renting available, making it difficult to recruit people to Devon. This also related to the recruitment of Education Psychologists.
- The Council had received a grant of £2.2m to embed restorative practice across all social work and care, which included the introduction of champions, mentoring and training of staff.
- Challenges in the Courts system as a result of the Pandemic had resulted in delays. The national target to conclude cases was 26 weeks, however in Devon the timescale was currently around 40 weeks; therefore, children remained in care longer than they should.

It was **MOVED** by Councillor Hannaford **SECONDED** by Councillor Aves and

RESOLVED

(a) that the Committee thanks the Cabinet Member and the Chief Officer for their prudent financial management over a very difficult year;

(b) that the Committee asks Cabinet to ensure sufficient funding for Children's Services in the 2022/23 Budget to take account of rising demand, pressure on services, ongoing improvement related projects and to minimise future overspend and further asks that there is sufficient capacity in the Council to complete a process-mapping exercise of the Eclipse Social Care Case Management System; and

(c) that the Committee requests that the following information is circulated to Members in preparation for the January 2022 Budget Meeting:

- I. A summary of the 2021 Budget and Spending Review and what it means for Devon's Children.
- II. A summary of the consultation of the proposed policy changes to School Improvement Grant.
- III. A summary of comparable local authority spending patterns used to benchmark where the Council compares as an authority on spending on Children's Services.

16 Children's Services Performance Report

The Committee received the Report of the Chief Officer for Children's Services which provided a performance update on Children's Social Care including key data demonstrating levels of demand and response across help, care and protection. The Report outlined key points such as referrals, the timeliness of assessments, the number of children in need, the number of children subject to a child protection plan, the number of children in care, care experienced young people, the number of caseloads for social workers, level of recruitment and an overview of the service's findings from practice week and audits.

The Report also included an Education and Learning Performance update, which provided an update on the take up of places in Early Years, Early Years Outcomes - 2018/19 data due to Covid, the number of school applications for 2020/21, number of school admission appeals, Children's Medical and Mental Health referrals, school attendance during Covid, attainment levels, the number of permanent exclusions, those in elective home education, and the number of pupils entitled to Free School Meals.

Members raised the following discussion points and questions with Officers in response to the Report:

- There were high numbers of children in need, with 686 young people on a Children in Need (CIN) Plan.
- Devon currently had the highest numbers it had ever seen of children on a Child Protection Plan, with 645 children – Members noted there needed to be more effective intervention at an earlier stage.
- The number of children in care had decreased from 840 to 807.
- Social Worker Caseloads had hit a peak in the summer, with a small number that had more than 30 children at assessment stage.
- Care Leavers – the Service was aware of 7 young people with no fixed abode – these were due to specific reasons for these young people and the Service area continued to work closely with them.

- Neglect had increased during the pandemic – 50% of young people on a Child Protection plan was due to neglect. Members were advised that the number of deaths amongst the younger age group (under 1s) and older teenagers predominantly through suicide, had increased nationally and in the South West – austerity measures had increased pressures on family, family networks were not available for new parents, new birth visits were taking place online rather than in person, and there had been a decrease in the amount of support and oversight available during the pandemic.
- The need to include comparator data with other local authorities that are performing well, to help Members understand where the Service needs to improve and examples of best practice.
- KS4 outcomes – the official results were very similar to those predicted within the Report – 73% achieved level 4 or above; 51% achieved level 5 or above (an increase on previous year). The Attainment 8 scores in Devon were just above national average, and the difference in performance between boys and girls result had reduced to approx. 6%
- Exclusions – Fixed Term Exclusions (FTS) remained much higher in boys compared to girls, the same with permanent exclusions. The gender gap was much higher in exclusions (as seen nationally); however, the introduction of the Exclusion Toolkit had reduced overall exclusion numbers in Devon.
- Recruitment and retention of teachers and school staff – schools were struggling to recruit staff, with many potential staff withdrawing applications once they see the cost of living in Devon. It had also impacted on TA posts and admin support posts – as changes to flexible working have meant more jobs were now available for admin staff to work from home, whereas previously the school term time hours would have been most beneficial.

17 **Corporate Parenting Strategies**

The Committee considered a Report (CS/21/15) of the Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing and the Senior Manager for Corporate Parenting outlining the Corporate Parenting Strategy and Sufficiency Strategy, explaining how every local authority had the unique responsibility to support children and young people in care, and care leavers, to feel safe, well and cared for. The whole Council, including all its staff and elected Members, should consider those children and young people as their own. The Report outlined the Council's vision, principles, and commitments for corporate parenting in Devon within the new Strategies.

Devon's vision was for all children and young people in Devon to have the best start in life and the opportunity to thrive. This meant they received the right support, at the right time, and in the right place. The Sufficiency Strategy described how this would be achieved by working restoratively with children and families to build on their strengths and resilience and help them remain safely at home together.

The vision for corporate parenting and the Council's commitments to ensuring sufficiency should be considered together. Both supported each other's aims for children and young people to be safe, well and achieving in life. Safety and stability at home, especially while living in care, underpinned good outcomes in all aspects of children and young people's lives. As such, sufficiency was a fundamental part of being the best possible corporate parents.

The strategies covered the three-year period of 2022-2024.

Members' discussion points included:

- A decrease in rates of adoption, currently below the national average, and the impact of issues around care proceedings, with large numbers of young people on special guardianship orders; this was being looked into by the service area.
- How other local authorities had more capacity in residential homes compared to Devon. It was noted that many other LAs used private residential homes rather than in-house providers and often placed out of county.
- Preparing children for adulthood and independent living – Members queried whether children in care received allowances or financial support to prepare them for independent living. Officers would provide a written response to be sent to all Members.
- Corporate Parenting Forum - Members felt strongly that meeting twice a year was not enough to effectively monitor services and maintain their duties as corporate parents. Members were advised that the Corporate Forum was open to all Members and would meet twice per year, with the Corporate Parenting Strategic Board, which had cross-party Membership, would meet bi-monthly. Officers would continue to speak with the LGA on how best to involve Members through this process.

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

RESOLVED that

The Committee welcomes both the Corporate Parenting Strategy and Sufficiency Strategy and places on record its thanks to those who were involved in the production of both strategies. The Committee commends both strategies to the Corporate Parenting Strategic Board for approval.

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

The Meeting started at 10.30 am and finished at 1.15 pm