

Report of the Children's Scrutiny Committee: Autumn Term School Visits

Report of the Director of Legal and Democratic Services

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Committee before taking effect.

1) Recommendation

That the Committee be asked to:

- (a) accept this report as an accurate record of the issues explored in the visits ensuring transparency in Scrutiny activities.

2) Background / Introduction

As part of the Children's Scrutiny Committee's role to learn and collect feedback from the public, partners and service users to inform their work and critical friend role, Members conducted 2 visits to Devon Schools in the Autumn Term: ACE Tiverton School and Bideford College.

To bring transparency, and ensure that Scrutiny is not 'carried out behind closed doors' a short report is brought back to the Committee to highlight pertinent issues and to take forward any actions or recommendations that have arisen.

3) Autumn Term School Visits

[3.1 ACE Tiverton School](#)

Councillors Su Aves, Tracy Adams, Ian Hall, Frank Letch and Philip Sanders visited ACE Tiverton School on Friday 24th November 2023.

The School and Trust

- ACE Tiverton is a special school, located in Tiverton, specialising in Autism Spectrum Condition and related Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs.
- The school opened in 2019 with 35 students and has now expanded to 108 students, with a 1:5 staff to pupil ratio. This is despite the school's PAN (Published Admissions Number) being 100. There were 26 Year 7s this academic year, with 20-25 expected next year.
- The school is open for years 7-11.
- Students travel to the school from a very large area, ranging from Ilfracombe to Axminster to Lapford to Newton Abbot. 80% of students arrive via taxi.

- School starts at 8am and finishes at 2pm – except on a Friday when it finishes at 1:30pm.
- The school is split over two sites, very close to each other.
- Classes or learning families are based on age, need and requirements on the EHCP.
- The school is part of the Transforming Futures Trust.
- Now the school is 5 years old, it is expecting its first Ofsted visit.



SEND/SEND System in Devon

- Transport is a significant issue for the school because it starts at 8am. The Transport Coordination Service (TCS) do not support transitions or part time tables and are rigid with their pick up/drop offs. An example was given of a student transitioning into the school who went home at 10am meaning a member of staff had to drive the student home.
- Decisions from the Panel for placements can sometimes take too long and delay students starting dates with the school, this means that some students are waiting for the panel to make a decision and miss out on school time.
- Schools having 'designations' means children are put into a 'box' based on their needs and there is less flexibility.

Working with services in Devon (DCC Services)

- **Education Psychologists (EP)** – The school raised concerns about the lack of EP services and the rise in statutory advice work due to more demand. The school would like to see EPs do more early intervention work to try to end the cycle of lack of early intervention and a rise in statutory services. The school would like to see some EP time ringfenced for early intervention and working with families. The school has access to an EP for 6 hours for the entire academic year, and said it was tricky to get access to their assigned EP. The school has their own counsellor which they pay for.
- **Children's Social Care/Social Workers** – The school highlighted working well with social care depended on the social worker who is working with the student. The school raised that one big help would be if they were told when the Social Worker changes, as they are often not aware when they change and spend time contacting staff who are no longer with DCC. The school gave an example of one child who has had 5 social workers since July. The school also gave an example of how there is a lack of joined up working between Social Care and Transport when children need to move to live somewhere else but transport do not allow them to change their routes.
- **MASH** – The new consultation line was praised, stating advice was usually good but with the caveat that it depends if someone was there to actually answer the phone rather than being transferred to customer services. The new referral form is easier to use and it is helpful to have a public level of need document. The school stated that most of the responses were No Further Action (NFA) or referral to Early Help – even

if the school states that the student is already in Early Help. The school stated it was challenging to get feedback from the MASH.

- **SEMH Team** – The school highlighted this team general consolidates what we already know as a school about a student. The school stated they have to contact this team to show it has had a conversation to show evidence of the conversations to process annual reviews.

Working with services in Devon (Others)

- **CAMHS/Mental Health** - The school has a student support team and a number of interventions it can do, however, it can not do clinical interventions. Access to CAMHS and Mental Health Services was difficult. The school stated that the CAMHS system changed so that information wasn't automatically shared with schools anymore – parents had to give consent to this – but this meant there was a lack of information sharing between services and the school.
- **Community help/support** – The School felt support and community services were a postcode lottery, depending on where students lived. Exeter has a lot of services and support but students living in rural areas do not have the same. The school itself run a family fun day and are engaged in the local Tiverton community.

Post pandemic reflections

- The school stated that their new Year 7s were the most challenging intake due to the pandemic's significant impact on skills, communication and engagement with education.
- Some of the basic building blocks were missed during the pandemic impacted school years.
- The school highlighted they remained open during the pandemic.

What would help to improve:

Councillors asked this question to staff, responses included:

- Work quicker – DCC is very process driven rather than outcome focused.
- Tell us if people are changing roles/positions or leaving – ensure that staff put an Out of Office message on their email if they leave with someone else to contact, this may be basic but it would save a lot of time/effort.
- Moving the SEND system to integrated services that meet need for children, young people on the ground with flexibility and resources on the ground. The conversation with the school was based around support services are largely people in offices writing reports rather than being on the ground, working with families.
- Investing in specialist skills in schools rather than outside services you have to buy in.
- More emphasis on early intervention/help – services in Devon are faster to access in a crisis rather than in prevention work e.g. access to CAMHS or EP in a crisis or referred via the Police.

After the main discussions with Matt and Julie, Members were split into two groups and led on a tour around the school by students Morgan, Angel and Jonah and Assistant Headteacher Rhys Davies. This covered many of the classrooms, giving Members an opportunity to listen into lessons, the dining hall, quiet spaces, the Haven site and the Gym.

Members were very impressed with the school, its facilities, staff and pupils and its ethos and felt it was a valuable visit to hear from the staff and students about their current challenges.

3.2 Bideford College

Councillors Linda Hellyer, Frank Letch MBE, Pru Maskell and Jeff Wilton Love visited Bideford College as part of the Children's Scrutiny Committee's role to learn and collect feedback from the public, partners and service users to inform their work and critical friend role.

The visit included meeting with 3 Senior Members of staff, meeting with 9 students, followed by a tour of the College site.

The College and Trust

- The school has c. 1500 students and is currently oversubscribed for places.
- The school is part of Athena Learning Trust, which covers 9 schools from Poole (Cornwall) to North Devon and is based in Launceston.
- Members asked staff about the benefits of multi-academy trusts as opposed to maintained schools – staff highlighted their flexibility over their budgets and curriculum and the ability to work beyond County/Local Authority borders.
- Staff told Members about the future challenges of recruitment into the school's sector. The government has missed recruitment targets this year and Staff predicted challenges for years to come as schools are less attractive places to work due to low pay and high pressures.
- The trust prides itself on supporting its teachers and wants to ensure they are well trained and work in a safe environment.
- As the only state funded secondary school for the town, Staff and Members spoke about the local Bideford area, its socio-economic indicators and how the school has had multiple generations of families through its doors.
- Staff and Members spoke honestly about the perception of the College in the local area and how the school was trying to improve this in many different ways – inviting people in for tours and improving communication with parents. Local Members acknowledged some of the issues were down to a small minority on local social media pages.



Councillors Hellyer, Wilton-Love and Maskell at Bideford College (Councillor Letch not pictured).

SEND

- The College has around 300 students on its SEND register, and 78 Education, Health and Care Plans at the time of the visit.
- The SENCO highlighted the SEND team has met with every family this term and a further 100 meetings with families to look at early intervention and ensuring needs are met as soon as the College can.

- The College is looking to do all it can to reduce its SEND numbers and ensure a stronger universal offer for all students.
- Staff felt that there are inconsistencies across Devon on what schools class as SEND and how they meet needs of children and young people – they gave the example of Autism being treated differently depending on the school.
- Staff viewed the SEND system and EHCPs as isolationist, exclusion based and heavily focusing on what students cannot do rather than why they can do and inclusion.
- Staff viewed Resource Bases as concerning, as places where young people go if the mainstream system cannot support their needs rather than working to support all children in mainstream schools.
- In terms of working with DCC teams, staff praised the teams they worked with and stated that they receive timely communication from the 0-25 Team. They understood the pressures DCC staff were under and highlighted the shared frustrations across the entire system.
- The College's biggest frustration was the lack of specialist provision in Devon and the pressures Alternative Provision put on their budgets. As an example, the College is funding 1 student's Alternative Provision package at £1k a week.

Inclusion, behaviour and student support

- The College takes inclusion very seriously and highlighted they had no permanent exclusions so far this academic year. However, suspensions were higher than the staff wanted but were coming down at around 3-6 a day. Staff stated that the College does not want to exclude any student but at times, a line is crossed which leads to the student needing to be suspended for a short period.
- The College uses a reflection room for students who have been removed from lessons. It is part of their behaviour or character curriculum, where taking responsibility for your actions is important.
- The College also have a team of Behaviour Mentors to help students and model good behaviour. So far this term, at least 2000 conversations have happened, focusing on both success and challenges.
- The College employs its own counsellors, acknowledging the long time it takes for students to see CAMHS services.

Conversation with Students

Members met with 9 of the College's students, all of which were on the SEND register, and were a range of ages. Members and students discussed a range of questions and topics including:

- If students enjoyed the being a student at the College?
- What their favourite thing was about the College? And what they didn't like so much?
- The transition from Primary school to the College.
- Behaviour and the School's rules.
- Student support, tutors, pastoral care and who they can talk to if they need support.
- The school day and school lunch options.

Members were very impressed with the school, highlighting how it was "informative, "uplifting", "encouraging" and left them feeling hopeful for the School's future and praising

the staff for being very passionate and committed to their pupils. Members also enjoyed meeting with the students, stating how they embraced the ethos of the school and welcomed their honesty to Councillors when discussing their college.

4) Options / Alternatives

The report is the summary of visits completed by Children's Scrutiny Committee Members. Scrutiny does not make decisions and this report does not propose any alternatives.

5) Consultations / Representations / Technical Data

As above, there are no specific considerations in regard to consultations, representations and technical data in this report.

6) Strategic Plan

The alignment of all Scrutiny activity with the strategic plan is detailed on the Scrutiny work programme. The issues raised in the report and the benefit of developing member knowledge and the 'critical friend' challenge of Scrutiny contribute to the Council achieving its strategic plan.

Improving Member knowledge on key issues contributes to the Council's commitment to being a trust, inclusive and innovative Council. It ensures good decision making and that the Council listens and learns.

7) Financial Considerations

There are no specific financial considerations in this report.

8) Legal Considerations

There are no specific legal considerations in this report.

9) Environmental Impact Considerations (Including Climate Change, Sustainability and Socio-economic)

There are no specific environmental impact considerations in this report.

10) Equality Considerations

There are no specific equality considerations in this report.

11) Risk Management Considerations

The activity of Scrutiny contributes to the mitigations for:

Ineffective Member Scrutiny

defined as: 'Due to ineffective scrutiny, the level and quality of service management may drop, leading to financial mismanagement or harm to staff and/or citizens and reputational damage e.g. Grenfell.

Member Effectiveness

defined as: 'Inadequate member effectiveness due to a lack of training, support and knowledge leads to a lack of challenge to corporate officers and/or poor decision making, resulting in a negative effect on the County's citizens (poor value for money, poor service delivery, harm, etc).'

12) Summary / Conclusions / Reasons for Recommendations

The report outlines the topic(s) covered at visits conducted by Children's Scrutiny Committee Members to Devon schools in November and December 2023, highlights the key points raised during discussion and details any agreed actions.

The report is formally reported to the Children's Scrutiny Committee in the interests of openness, transparency and good decision making.

Maria Price

Director of Legal and Democratic Services

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Organisational Development, Workforce & Digital Transformation:
Councillor Andrew Saywell

Local Government Act 1972: List of background papers

Background Paper – NIL

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Appendix: Attendance

ACE Tiverton School, Tiverton

Date: Friday 24th November 2023 – 9:00am

Children's Scrutiny Committee Members: Councillors Su Aves, Tracy Adams, Ian Hall, Frank Letch MBE and Philip Sanders.

Scrutiny Officer: Charlie Fisher.

ACE Tiverton Staff: Matt Sambrook (CEO – Transforming Futures), Julie Chatterton (Head of School) and Rhys Davies (Assistant Headteacher).

Bideford College, Bideford

Date: Thursday 14th December 2023 – 11:30am

Children's Scrutiny Committee Members: Councillors Linda Hellyer, Frank Letch MBE, Pru Maskell and Jeff Wilton-Love.

Scrutiny Officer: Charlie Fisher.

Bideford College Staff: Ben Parnell (CEO – Athena Learning Trust), Rachel Vowles (Assistant Principal/SEND/CO) and Averill Jewell (Assistant Principal/Safeguarding).