

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS & DISABILITIES (SEND) TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME UPDATE

Report of the Director of Children and Young People's Futures

1.1 Recommendation

That the Committee be asked to:

- (a) To Note the updates on SEND Transformation Programme set out within this report

1.2 Given the relatively short period between meetings for this update, additional activity over the November – January reporting window has been steady but relatively limited in scope.

1.3 Most notably, the Local Area formally launched its updated SEND Strategy in late November. Building on work undertaken originally in Rotherham in 2011, the strategy's focus on cultural change will be supported by the Four Cornerstones approach to co-production which will support the Local Area to deliver against 4 public commitments; we will think beyond barriers to support aspiration; we will improve how we communicate around SEND; we will develop new and better ways of working for children and young people; and we will build more inclusive communities. The focus will now be on embedding its principles and accelerating practice improvement into 2025.

1.4 More widely, activity also continued around a range of transformation projects activities across the wider area. This included the ongoing rollout of early help pilot activity in Northern Devon, a range of support work around systems and statutory process improvements to assist and improve the handling of plan development within the authority, and agreement of additional cross organisational working around autism and other health related priorities. A focus in January will be placed upon ensuring all relevant partners are further engaged in these work strands, building on feedback received in the run up to Christmas.

1.5 Following on from the challenges faced around the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) in Month 6 however, financial pressures linked to heightened demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) have continued through to Month 8 /9 of the financial year. Whilst the pace of acceleration around expenditure outside of forecast has slowed somewhat, in part due to the management actions taken through our November update, the financial strain arising from the ongoing management of our backlog of Education, Health and Care Plans alongside challenges around sufficiency (leading to an increased usage of the independent sector) continues. This will see the

authority exceed its deficit position for the High Needs Block by around £20m this financial year.

- 1.6 In response, considerable work has been ongoing over November and December to specifically address and reinforce the ability of the Authority to better manage process and financial demands. Recognising the need for immediate action, a daily panel of senior officers was established in late October to review all expenditure decisions coming through the service. To date, this has reviewed over £7 million of expenditure decisions, seeking to ensure best value. This has been accompanied by a new workstream considering whether any potential overpayments have been made to providers, a range of work around our current cost sharing arrangements with partners (health/education), and preparatory work around changing our approach to contracting and commissioning arrangements with providers in the new year.
- 1.7 Over and above immediate action to enhance financial controls, work has also been ongoing to further reinforce the existing SEND Transformation Programme. Additional staff resources from across the authority are currently being deployed into crucial areas including system improvements, commissioning, contracting and policy development, to ensure that operational controls and behaviours are reinforced across the SEND area. Work on a redesign of staffing within lead services is also currently underway, with a focus on enhancing leadership and oversight of financial and practice decision making. Work has also been accelerated around our engagement with schools and wider partners, seeking to improve shared provision approaches and reinforcing practice which will ultimately support reduced costs. This includes early discussions on additional resource hubs and other community and practice led solutions to manage down demand, and better meet the needs of young people across the mainstream and specialist school sector.
- 1.8 Demand for EHCPs across the county though remains a critical challenge for the authority. Despite significant management activity to review plans, the overall number of young people with an EHCP in Devon continues to grow. The current total number of EHCPs in November 2024 was 9,754, with the forecast projection (at current rate) due to be 9,833 at January 2025, 461 over that within the safety valve plan. The authority also continues to face an ongoing challenge around its backlog, with around 620 overdue plans still to address, and some pressure from Government to halve this number in the next financial year. This is despite the monthly number of plans assessed having doubled in year. There may be however some early evidence that the management action being put in place is now having an impact across the SEND service, with the average cost of an EHCP dropping during the month by £80 during November (to £16,965), the first such drop this financial year.
- 1.9 In light of the above, the Authority has continued and intensified its detailed discussions with the Department for Education over the November and December period, notably about how it wishes to manage the emerging national picture around Safety Valve deficits and performance. Devon, in line with many other authorities, will this year face a degree of financial creep against its original projections, with DfE currently considering how it wishes to address this in the face of wider pressures around SEND across the entire country. The Authority will report back on next steps as and when they are agreed, but has proposed (alongside a number of other

Authorities) that some form of reprofiling of deals will be required this year if the long term trajectory towards a zero deficit is to be achieved by the early 2030's.

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