

## **Report of the Children's Standing Overview Group – October 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 6<sup>th</sup> October 2020, highlights the key points raised during discussion and details any agreed actions.

### **2. Attendance**

Councillors Rob Hannaford (Chair), Su Aves, Frank Biederman, Julian Brazil, Jonathan Hawkins, Linda Hellyer, Richard Hosking, 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) and Vivien Lines (Improvement Director)

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 Children's Commissioner Findings and Recommendations**

Eleanor Brazil, Children's Commissioner (Department for Education) presented Members with a summary of her key findings and recommendations which were included in her report submitted to the Minister. The presentation covered:

- The Commissioner's task, which focussed on areas including supporting the Council to develop a strong improvement partnership, reviewing and providing assurance to the DfE on current service arrangements and providing monitoring and practice advice in response to Covid-19;
- The Commissioner had carried out a number of activities to inform her review and report including meeting with a range of frontline staff, managers, partners and Members, reviews and inspections prior to 2020, the Council's self-evaluation, partnership arrangements and Covid-19 response, and attending workshops and forums;
- A range of staff feedback was shared, covering areas such as the partnership response to Covid-19, recruitment and retention and morale;

- The Commissioner reported confidence in the determination of leaders to improve services and that the response to Covid-19 had been very effective. She also noted that plans for improvement are in place and activity is underway, but that this was not consistently having the impact required;
- The Commissioner's full conclusions and recommendations to both the Council and partners, and the Minister and DfE are outlined in full in her report, which is now with the Minister. A response is expected in the coming weeks.

Members raised and discussed:

- Concerns around the Council's approach towards recruitment and retention, which would be considered by Members in more detail through a Spotlight Review;
- The balance between social work Team Managers providing high support but also high challenge, and ensuring that challenge is seen by all staff as a necessary and positive part of good practice;
- Key areas and methods to support scrutiny in monitoring the progress and success of Children's Social care which included monitoring the timeliness of visits, reviews, and assessments, having access to reliable quantitative and qualitative performance information, the consistency of practice across the County and the use of case audits, and making best use of the Scrutiny Special Advisor, who is able support Members with informed and specialist questioning.

### **3.2 September Monitoring Inspection Feedback**

Vivienne Lines, Improvement Director appraised Members of initial feedback received from Ofsted following their monitoring visit in September. The final letter from Ofsted is expected on 15<sup>th</sup> October and will be circulated to Members. Points covered in the presentation included:

- The methodology for the visit, which was carried out over two days by the same inspectors who undertook the full inspection in January; the focus was on key improvement priorities for care leavers around line of sight by senior managers, risk assessment and safety planning and accommodation and support;
- Inspectors reviewed key documents and practice evaluations of six care leavers and met with ten Personal Advisors (PAs) discussing both 'high risk' cases and examples of good practice; in total inspectors reviewed 16-18 of the 40 most high risk care leavers; inspectors also met with focus groups of Team Managers and young people;
- Detailed findings from the monitoring visiting will be included in the Ofsted letter but key strengths were noted in a number of areas including clearer line of sight to the most vulnerable young people at all levels, regular formal case supervision, 'resilient and strong' staff, there were no young people found to be at immediate risk or any that the service was not already aware of, and young people with complex risk and exploitation issues are being seen frequently (often daily) by their PAs to ensure that they are safe;
- Support and accommodation for care leavers is improving but there is still more to do to ensure that all care leavers have access to safe and appropriate accommodation;
- Quality assurance has improved with case audits being of better quality and consistency;
- A number of next steps were proposed including multi agency solutions for young people with more complex needs and risk-taking behaviours, ensuring that PAs have the right training and skill set and the introduction of a new high quality pathway plan, with a focus on raising our ambitions for care leavers;
- The Improvement Plan will be refreshed over the coming weeks to reflect these findings;
- Ofsted are expecting to return in January 2021 with a Focused Covid-19 Visit.

Members raised concerns about the numbers of care leavers still living in 'unsuitable accommodation' noting that this definition includes any house of multiple occupancy (including halls of residence) and prison.

**Action:** Care Lever accommodation to be added to the agenda for the December Standing Overview Group, including market capacity and risk assessment.

### 3.3 Children's Services Self-Assessment

Fiona Fleming, Head of Commissioning (Children's Services) and Rachel Gillott, Acting Head of Children's Social Care reported on the draft Children's Services Self-Assessment, which formed part of a programme of peer challenge across the South West. Completion of the Ofsted Self Evaluation which would normally be completed alongside the Self-Assessment had been delayed to enable the service to take into account the formal findings from the September Ofsted Monitoring Visit.

Members commented on how comprehensive and informative the self-assessment was, giving a thorough overview of where the Council sees strengths, risks and areas for improvement. Members felt that all Members of the Council would benefit from reading the self-assessment once finalised.

**Action:** The completed and finalised Children's Services Self-Assessment to be circulated to Members.

### 3.4 Return to School Update

Dawn Stabb, Head of Education and Learning updated Members on the return to schools for children in Devon. This included an update on school attendance figures (as of the previous week compared to the available national figures at the time):

- 93% of the Devon school population (88% nationally);
- 87% of pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) (81% nationally);
- 87% of pupils with a social workers (82% nationally).

An update was also provided on confirmed cases of Covid-19 in schools:

- There are now 12 schools across Devon with at least one confirmed case of Covid-19;
- 272 pupils and staff have been tested and there have been 14 positive results;
- One school had a case which was considered a high probability of Covid-19, despite a negative test result and that this case was treated in the same way as a positive test result with appropriate measures taken;
- Schools have access to some tests but there are difficulties with reordering replacements.

Discussion also covered:

- The importance of supporting children to attend and continue attending school and how the Council is working with schools and families to achieve this;
- The lack of additional funding available to schools to manage the pandemic for the Autumn term; the Council and F40 are lobbying government on this issue;
- School transport arrangements which mean that pupils are sitting on school buses by year group and have been instructed to wear masks for the journey; Members raised concerns that this was not happening in some cases;

- Support had been put in place for schools who are struggling with staff absence due to Covid-19 to help avoid school closures;
- There is considerable additional pressure on schools and teachers, who are now expected to support pupils who are self-isolating at home, as well as teaching a full timetable of classes;
- Further Education colleges have completed risk assessments in the same way as schools; the Council does not have the same oversight as with schools but there are strong links with the colleges through the Council's Economy Team.

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