

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

26 January 2023

Present:

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

Councillor J Bradford (remote)

Apologies:

Councillors J Brazil and J Hawkins and Ms C Platt

Members attending in accordance with Standing Order 25

Councillor A Leadbetter

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Minutes

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 15 November 2022 be signed as a correct record.

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Items Requiring Urgent Attention

There was no matter raised as a matter of urgency.

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Announcements

The Chair welcomed Mrs R Saltmarsh who was attending the meeting in her capacity as Co-opted member of the Council's Standards Committee to observe and monitor compliance with the Council's ethical governance framework.

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Public Participation

There were no oral representations from members of the public.

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Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

The Committee were updated as to the Work Programme.

* 78 **Children's Social Care Performance**

The Committee received the Report of the Director of Children and Young people's Futures which provided a performance update on Children's Social Care.

The Report outlined the following key points:-

- Referral rates had increased across the country in September after the return to school, with Devon (484 per 10,000) now being below the national average (465), but higher than statistical neighbours.
- Assessment performance had continued to improve to 90% in October, which was higher than both the national and statistical neighbours.
- Child protection plans had increased, but was in line with national and statistical neighbours.
- Children in care numbers was increasing, largely due to the significant number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children, now currently standing at 48, compared to 10 in October 2021, but still lower than the national average and statistical neighbours.
- The percentage of agency social workers had increased in October to 37.9%, and the average caseload had now reduced to 17, compared to 23 in March 2022.

Members' questions and discussion points with Officers, included:

- All assessments were now under the one head of service, which was hoped would provide better oversight and outcomes. A review of Early Help was also being undertaken looking particularly at transition between services and to understand how children could be helped earlier.
- As to assessments within 45 days, this was a national measure, and it was expected that children would be seen within 4-6 days, some on the same day. There was still work to do on the quality of assessments with the multi-agencies involved. Feedback on performance was closely monitored. The Committee acknowledged the significant improvement.
- The dashboard showed there were five children in care under 16s in unregistered accommodation and it was questioned the number for the older age range of 17-18. Officers would revert post-meeting.
- The ambition of the recruitment and retention strategy was to reduce the numbers of agency/consultancy staff by converting them to permanent staff. Members agreed it would be useful to see a trajectory of the reductions and Officers agreed to provide this at a later date.
- Officers agreed to send a briefing note to Members post-meeting on assurance of where our children and young people were accommodated; how children were safeguarded in unsuitable accommodation; and the report submitted to the Department for Education on the national review, to assure Members further, following the Doncaster case.

- Children's Services were working with the Communities team to ensure that support platforms were in place for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), particularly for females, if required.

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

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- (a) Welcomes the sustained improvement within the report, for example, assessment timeliness within 45 days.
- (b) Raises concerns about 25% of care leavers in unsuitable accommodation, but welcomes further information on this.
- (c) Asks the Cabinet Member to work with Officers to set out what targets for recruitment, retention and agency rates the Service should look to achieve in 12 months' time so that progress can be checked.

* 79 **Ofsted Monitoring Visit**

The Chief Officer for Children's Services reported that the letter from Ofsted was currently embargoed until publication on Monday, and extended her thanks to all staff for their involvement in the two-day Ofsted visit.

The letter would be fully considered at the next meeting of the Committee in March.

* 80 **Education Annual Report**

The Committee received the Education and Learning Annual Performance report Autumn 2022, based on published data to 25 October 2022.

Particular points to note in the report included:

- That 17.5% of the Devon pupil population in state funded schools were eligible for free school meals, and Devon remained significantly lower than the national average (22.5% at Jan 2022).
- Pupils in Devon from an ethnic minority background had increased to 8.6%, which was lower than that seen nationally and regionally.
- 4.9% of pupils in Devon had an EHCP, which was significantly higher than nationally and regionally.
- In 2021/22, 2,502 children were registered as home education at some time during the year, equating to 1.98% of the school age population – an increase of almost 5% on the previous year.
- As at Jan 2022, the percentage of 2-year olds benefitting from early years funded places had increased, with Devon still performing significantly better than nationally, regionally and statistical neighbours.

- Year 1 Phonics attainment had fallen, but Devon pupils had performed slightly better than nationally (76% compared to 75% nationally). For pupils eligible for Free School Meals, attainment had fallen, widening the gap (22% in Devon compared to 17% nationally).

Points raised during discussion with Members and Officers included:

- Concern around school attendance and the increase of those electively home educated; and also the rise in suspensions and exclusions, particularly in primary schools.
- Concern also around the overall attainment of children and disadvantaged children.
- Members supported the work to improve inclusion in Devon.
- Concern around the challenges in recruitment and retention of teachers and support staff in schools; and the need to support teachers throughout their teaching careers.
- Members requested a briefing note on the work currently taking place around Alternative Provision.
- Members supported the potential IT improvements (costing £70,000) that would ensure eligible children were automatically registered for free school meals and suggested a letter be written to Cabinet in support.
- Members' dissatisfaction with the below average level of funding for Devon's schools.

It was noted that there was a planned Scrutiny Spotlight Review on Recruitment and Retention in Children's Services.

The Committee wished to put on record their thanks to all teachers and the education community for all the work they were doing to support students.

* 81 **Early Help Strategy**

The Committee considered the new Early Help Strategy 2022-2026, as presented by the Head of Early Help and Partnerships, which supported the Children and Young People's Plan.

The Strategy was central to delivering the partnership ambition for children, young people and their families to achieve their potential, to thrive, to have the best start in life and be protected from harm and receive early support. The Strategy reflected feedback received across the partnership, communities and families.

The Strategy was a 'call to action' and sought to address the challenges that children, families and professionals experience when seeking early support. The Strategy identified the following three priorities:

1. Develop the culture of child friendly Devon.

2. Children and families in Devon receive the right support, in the right place at the right time.
3. Partnership knowledge and demonstrating impact for children and families.

There was an Early Help Strategic Delivery Group which was a countywide multi-agency group that was accountable to the Devon's Children and Families Partnership Executive Board. To support the Early Help Strategic Delivery Group, there were ongoing workstreams to continue developing early help practice further.

The Strategy was formally approved by the Devon Children and Families Partnership in November 2022.

Members' questions and Officer discussion included:

- Asked if the Council had a series of funded children and youth centres, the Head of Service undertook to provide a list of these post-meeting, together with further information on the early help offer support services.
- The Strategy was for all children and young people 0-19 years and up to 25 years for young people with special educational needs and disabilities, and the Head of Service would make this more explicit in the document.
- A key message for Members was that the service wanted to support children and families as early as possible without having to wait for an early help assessment to be completed prior to intervention.
- Clarity that although early help assessment targets would not be set, the number of assessments would be reported on.
- Children and families' feedback would be collected routinely throughout the intervention and not just at the end. A parent and young person's forum would also be created to give feedback on different issues.
- Performance data would be shared, to include number of early help assessments completed by month, and in relation to targeted early help services.

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

The Meeting started at 2.15 pm and finished at 4.21 pm

