

# Report of the Children's Standing Overview Group of Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> April 2023

## 1. Introduction

The Standing Overview Group of the Children's Scrutiny Committee meets regularly as an informal information sharing and member development session where issues are presented to the councillors to raise awareness and increase knowledge. The Standing Overview Group considers key updates and pertinent issues from across different services, with the aim of developing Members' knowledge, and bringing to the forefront any areas which may benefit from further scrutiny.

Any action points arising from the sessions are reported back to the next formal Committee meeting.

This report outlines the topic(s) covered at the meeting of Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> April 2023, highlights the key points raised during discussion and details any agreed actions.

## 2. Recommendation(s)

The Children's Scrutiny Committee accepts this report as an accurate record of the meeting and agrees the outlined actions raised during the discussion including the addition of the highlighted issues of concern to the future work programme.

## 3. Attendance

Scrutiny Members: Councillors Rob Hannaford (Chair), Janet Bradford, Phil Bullivant, Frank Letch, Lois Samuel and Ms Claire Platt.

Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools: Councillor Andrew Leadbetter.

Children's Services Officers: Steve Liddicott (Deputy Director – Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing), Jo Siney (Head of Service – Disabled Children's Service), Vikki Hearn (Head of Service – Children's Commissioning and Resources), Paul Williamson (Children's Commissioning) and Glen Lobb (Service Manager - Countywide Services).

Special Advisor: Melanie John Ross.

Scrutiny Officer: Charlie Fisher.

## 4. Summary of Discussion

### 4.1 Short Breaks for Disabled Children and Direct Payments Review

The report of Jo Siney (Head of Service, Disabled Children's Service) set out the work being undertaken by the Short Breaks Project Board to develop and improve the local offer

of short breaks for disabled children and young people. The Head of Service's presentation appraised Members of short breaks, the current position in Devon, the future aims, commissioning intentions, key areas of work, the revised Direct Payment Guidance and the proposed timescales.

The report was originally scheduled at the Committee meeting of Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> March (Minute item 89), but the Committee resolved to defer the item to the Standing Overview Group meeting.

Across Devon, 1735 children and young people are supported by the Disabled Children's Service (DCS). Of which, 1439 are supported with short break support from the DCS Support and Advice Teams. 1403 children and young people are supported by Direct Payments. The Council's annual spend is around £5m.

The Head of Service appraised Members of the current challenges with the Council's current approach to short breaks and direct payments. The Head of Service highlighted that the Council is over-reliant on direct payments to provide short breaks and many families are unable to make short break arrangements through direct payments, and therefore not supported in the way the service hopes. Families report that they are unable to find local activities where their children are welcome and included (creating reliance on 1:1 support increasing market sufficiency issues and reliance on high-cost options) and there are difficulties with recruiting enablers with the skills needed to support our families. In addition, the number of families being supported through Disabled Children's Service is very high, impacting on ability of service to provide support and review for families most in need.

The key areas of work brought to the attention of Members included:

- Development of a Short Break Commissioning Strategy 2021-25 to deliver the commissioning intentions which have been developed in partnership with families across a wide range of consultation.
- The intention of a graduated support offer of short breaks provision. The lowest level of support would be advice and guidance, moving to families being able to access local, community and inclusive activities. The Disabled Children's Service would identify families who need additional support and co-ordinate that support.
- Improvements to practice and to supporting families. This includes a new helpline for advice and improving short breaks assessments to be more holistic to look at the needs of children and parents/carers.
- Direct Payments improvement plan with specific actions to improve controls and measures as recommended by Devon Audit Partnership in their review. The Devon Audit Partnership highlighted the Direct Payments Policy was out of date and needed to be reviewed. This work has included a review of our Direct Payment Guidance which has been updated to ensure it provides the guidance needed for families and professionals.

The Head of Service highlighted that the work, notwithstanding the feedback from this meeting with Members, is ready for final approval with implementation of the new Direct Payments Guidance from May 2023.

Discussion and questions with Members included the following areas:

- The views of service users (children, young people and families) in any potential changes to their plans – The Head of Service responded that there is a balance and officers have been trying to make sure changes happen at a steady and sensitive pace, keeping families up to date and ensuring families remain confident in the support they are receiving. DCS are working with families so they know that the service is working with the community offer and there are community offers that are a positive step forward and inclusive for families. Feedback from families has been overwhelmingly positive and have opted in to being kept informed on plans. The Head of Service also recognised that there will be families who may be worried and this was one of the reasons for having a helpline for advice and showing the service is a listening service. As the service develops through its commissioning strategy, the Head of Service highlighted that families would be part of that process to co-design work and build the confidence and trust of families.
- Timescales and the pace of change for this work - The Head of Service commented that pace of change is something that families have fed back and make improvements. There has been a need to get the momentum back into this work and the pace is intended to be fast but understanding that the full procurement exercise would take around 12 to 18 months. During this time, work is ongoing with the community and organisations to help them to make an offer for disabled children, inclusive support and gaps.
- Considering the rural nature of Devon to ensure access across all of Devon – The commissioning strategy seeks to understand the current provision in Devon and part of the mapping work and feedback from families has been about discovering organisations that could become part of the Short Break provider network. Services in rural areas are often at a travelable distance and transport plays a factor in access. The Head of Service welcomed Councillors in sharing local groups or knowledge to the service to help. The service wants to use the rurality and beauty of Devon including coastal and countryside areas to children to be able to access all of Devon e.g. a surf club in North Devon working to give disabled children access to the sea.
- Joint commissioning work with health partners in respect of children with complex medical needs – Members were advised that an ICB lead commissioner is on the Short Breaks Commissioning Board and is enthusiastic about opportunities for joint commissioning. The service has a good working relationship with the ICB and work with the ICB on joint commissioning arrangements for children and individual packages for residential short breaks for children with complex needs.
- Devon's over-reliance on direct payments and barriers to unlocking services in Children's Services – The Head of Service responded that developing a graduate response relies on a welcoming and inclusive community to support meeting the needs of children. This takes time to build up the skills and confidence of organisations to be able to offer provision to children. Part of the management of finite resources has been to put in criteria or steps to accessing support. But the aim is to change to build confidence and training.
- Indicators to show if the goals are being met – The Head of Service commented that the service would want to hear that families know how to access support and are

able to access that support appropriately and that support makes a difference. An indicator would be the numbers of children accessing inclusive opportunities. For the service, less escalation of need and less escalation of families who cannot cope or need more support would show support is right and making a difference. Scrutiny can keep track on being clear about the service's resources, the promotion of inclusion and that support is making a difference to families.

- Engagement with the Bridges Service – The services have worked together and Bridges have upskilled their staff, particularly around autism so they can understand what makes a difference to families.
- Access to holiday activities – The Parent Carer Forum has fed back on this and officers are regularly meeting to look at problem solving difficulties accessing support and being more inclusive. The definition of inclusive varies and disabled children are a hidden group and so awareness is not common. The service want to explore what is possible rather than what isn't possible.

Members were content with the rationale behind proposals and vision and welcomed the positive work of the Head of Service and her team. Members particularly praised the commitment and understanding of the Head of Service. The Chair asked if Members could be updated with further information on this work in around 6 months time.

## 4.2 Homes for Children Update

Vikki Hearn (Head of Service, Commissioning and Resources) presented to Members on the current picture of placements and the development of new placements.

Pertinent information on our children in care included (as of 29th March 2023):

- There were 892 Children in Care.
- By largest types of placement, 603 were placed in Foster & Kinship, 104 in residential, 80 in semi-independent unregulated and 43 parental responsibility.
- By placement provision, 457 were in DCC provision and 331 in private provision.
- By Permanency Plan type: 398 in long term fostering, 118 return to family, 108 unknown, 67 adoption, 57 SGO and 56 long term residential.
- Of the 104 in residential care, 42% were placed outside of Devon County Council for a number of different reasons.
- 13 were in unregistered placements.
- The average cost of a placement in residential care had increased from £4844 per week in 2020/21 to £5,901 per week, which was around the national average. High cost placements were costing on average £12,358 per week.

The Head of Service appraised Members of the improvement actions and activity within the service to improve sufficiency. This included focusing on internal provision and building placements, working with providers to better manage our young people and a better system and processes to secure placements and track children and young people on their journey. The Council was successful in Wave 2 of the DfE Capital Fund, securing £733,354 and has bid for Wave 3 funding for the Staying Close programme, which the Council is awaiting the outcome for.

The Children's Home Capital Projects presents an opportunity to break the negative cycle of our current placements that are high cost and not always appropriate and expand on our already rated 'Good' Children's Homes. By converting Barnes Children's Home into a 2-unit residential home, Welland to a 2 bedroom home and converting the Link Centre (Holsworthy) into 3 semi-independent flats, the service will be able to find suitable, cost-effective accommodation for some of our most complex children in need whilst the service works with them. Welland and Barnes are already Ofsted registered so just need variation orders on their beds. Other possibilities for other DCC owned property exists, such as emergency beds and 16 to 18 supported living. The service's plans for the 'Staying Close' bid is to secure 4 properties across Devon to allow 24 young people to living in self-contained rooms/flats, with personal advisors on site. The plans are not reliant on the Wave 3 bid, but capital funding would allow for the project to progress faster.

Discussion and questions with Members included the following areas:

- Members welcomed the work to build more places. Children's Scrutiny has been advocating for more in house provision for many years, evidenced in their Budget commentaries from previous years – The Cabinet Member commented that it was something he supported to reduce the number the Council sends out of county and unregistered placements. The Cabinet Member commented that the work has taken some time to organise and Officers commented that progress is now being made and they hoped that progress would be fast.
- The long-term budgetary implications of in house provisions – Officers responded that having more in house provision is not a 'cheap' option but there is an opportunity to focus on quality and the outcomes of children and young people. But in house provisions to allow for some savings when considering social worker visits and access to local services. Our current homes are rated 'Good' from Ofsted and Officers commented that should be reassuring to Members because Officers would expect that quality to continue.
- Working with communities near to local homes to reassure local people and providers, especially during the planning process – Members raised that the planning process and location of homes is sensitive and local people have concerns but more needs to be done to promote the homes as a service to young people and any negative connotations. The Head of Service commented that services need to include local communities as they play a role in bringing up children and young people. Officers commented that the planning process for providers can be very difficult and very costly.
- The work of the Corporate Parenting Strategic Board on children in care and permanency planning – The Cabinet Member responded that the board had been relaunched and he would appraise the Chair of the work at a future meeting with the new Head of Service.
- Members questioned the number of additional beds in respect of the actual number of beds Devon needs and the projections needed in our sufficiency plans – The Head of Service commented that the sufficiency strategy does need further work and improved data sets to understand our needs. The plans detailed today include 8 beds and up to 24 for Staying Close, but that this is the first step. Caution was needed to ensure the service understand our needs and can plan what is needed to

build. Part of the wider strategy is building family provisions, more foster parents and therapeutic foster parenting. The Head of Service offered to bring the Sufficiency Strategy back to the Committee.

The Chair positively welcomed the work of the Head of Service and Officers and offered his support to any future Cabinet reports on the work, on behalf of the Committee. The Chair asked for a future update to Members in around 6 months on this work.

## 5. Next Meeting

The Chair noted that the next meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Committee meeting is scheduled for Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> June 2023.

The meeting began at 3pm and ended at 4:29pm.

Councillor Rob Hannaford  
Chair, Children's Scrutiny Committee

Electoral Divisions: All

Contact for Enquiries: Charlie Fisher (Scrutiny Officer) – [charlie.fisher@devon.gov.uk](mailto:charlie.fisher@devon.gov.uk)