

## CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

6 June 2023

### Present:-

Councillors S Aves (Chair), P Sanders (Vice-Chair), T Adams, J Bradford, J Brazil, I Hall, L Hellyer (remote), F Letch MBE, L Samuel and M Squires

### Apologies:-

Councillors P Bullivant, C Channon, G Gribble, P Maskell and J Wilton-Love

### Members attending in accordance with Standing Order 25

Councillors J Hart and A Leadbetter

#### \* 90 **Items Requiring Urgent Attention**

There was no matter raised as a matter of urgency.

#### \* 91 **Minutes**

**RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting held on 14 March 2023 be signed as a correct record.

#### \* 92 **Chair's Announcements**

(a) The Chair welcomed Mrs Ruth 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.

(b) Ms Claire Platt, the Church of England Co-opted representative, had tendered her resignation from the Committee, and thanks were extended to Ms Platt for her time on the Committee and the contributions she made. The Diocese would advise a replacement in due course.

#### \* 93 **Public Participation**

In accordance with the Council's Public Participation Rules, the Committee received and acknowledged oral representations made by Nicola Cardwell Brewin, Elaine Davis-Kimble, Caroline Bolingbroke and Astrid Harding on a matter to be considered by the Committee that day, namely the SEND Improvement Plan. In short, their respective representations covered:

- Concerns there had been no improvement in the EHCP process one year on from the last Joint Local Area SEND Inspection.
- Concern about the recent SEND survey produced by PCFD and explaining the concept for a survey to be produced by Devon SEND Parents and Carers for Change.
- Commenting on the EHCP Hub; and communication in regard to SEND.
- A range of 'lived testimony' statements from parents and carers of children with SEND living in Devon.

The Chair responded, thanking each for their attendance and presentations which would be taken into account by the Committee during its subsequent deliberations.

\* **94**      **Scrutiny Committee Work Programme**

The Committee was updated as to the Work Programme and it was agreed to add the following item(s):

- Exeter University post pandemic research
- Young Carers

Members noted that Children's Services currently had limited capacity due to dealing with priority matters.

\* **95**      **Election of Commissioning Liaison Member**

In line with the recommendations of the 'Scrutiny in a Commissioning Council' Task Group Report, the Committee was asked to select a Commissioning Liaison Member, whose role was to work closely with the relevant Cabinet Members and Chief Officers/Heads of Service, developing a fuller understanding of commissioning processes, and to provide a link between Cabinet and Scrutiny on commissioning and commissioned services.

It was **MOVED** by Councillor Aves, **SECONDED** by Councillor Samuel and

**RESOLVED** that Councillor Sanders be re-appointed as the Commissioning Liaison Member for the Children's Scrutiny Committee for the ensuing year.

\* **96**      **SEND Improvement Plan - Progress on Task Group Recommendations**

(Councillor Leadbetter attended in accordance with Standing Order 25(1) and spoke to this item at the invitation of the Committee.)

The Committee received a presentation on the SEND Task Group Recommendations: Linked to the SEND Improvement Plan. The Improvement Plan had been considered by the Committee at its last meeting.

The presentation highlighted:

- Staff caseloads to be reduced to the average of our demographic neighbours, and no more than 200 per officer.
- There were currently 8,412 learners with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). 16 permanent vacancies had been successfully recruited to, starting in September. There was currently an interim team working on the backlog of annual reviews.
- Approximately 200 requests for assessment were received each month, so the number of EHCPs was growing and would continue to do so.
- A more streamlined template for the EHCP, going back to basics, which would be piloted later in the year.
- Various training was being rolled out across the team including subject specific training regarding EHCPs and annual reviews.
- The service structure would be reviewed and the direction of travel was to have one team, with good practice to align around schools rather than postcodes.
- The EHCP Hub was being looked at to see how it could be made more user friendly.
- HR were working with the service to ensure good practice in recruitment and retention.
- Emphasis on the importance of working with the Commissioner and national partners on the issue of the safety valve debt which was linked to SEND improvement.

Questions and discussion points with Members and Officers included:

- The Service was working hard to drive forward the Plan at a greater pace, but it was recognised that progress would take time.
- The capacity of the health system in carrying out assessments around e.g. autism, which remained a national issue. An NHS presentation had been given to the Improvement Board to address these challenges, which Officers undertook to circulate to the Committee.
- A governance review around Children's Services was developing and was seen as imperative going forward.
- There was a large backlog of education psychology assessments which were needed for EHCPS and although there was a national shortage of educational psychologists, a number had been recruited.

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### **Ofsted Monitoring Visit Letter**

(Councillor Leadbetter attended in accordance with Standing Order 25(1) and spoke to this item at the invitation of the Committee.)

The Committee received the Ofsted letter, which summarised the findings of the monitoring visit to Devon Children's Services on 18 and 19 April 2023. This had been the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority had been judged inadequate in January 2020.

Areas covered by the visit were of the progress made in the quality and impact of services for children in care, with a particular focus on the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Permanence planning for children
- The quality and timeliness of life-story work
- The assessment of children looked after placed with parents
- Strategic oversight and grip on areas for improvement and oversight by senior leaders, including case audits and supervision.

The letter detailed the headline findings and evaluation of progress, noting positive areas of progress and areas that still required improvement.

Questions and discussion points with Members and Officers included:

- The timely permanency planning for children in care remained a concern and area of improvement and, although the Corporate Parenting Strategic Partnership Board had significantly improved, there remained wider partnership work to do.
- Important to note that there was a permanent Director of Children's Services starting in September and a Deputy Director of Social Care starting in mid-July to continue the improvement journey, working closely with the Commissioner in managing the transition.
- Officers commented that there were no quick wins or easy fixes but were focused on ensuring the wellbeing of staff and ensuring good, consistent practice across the service.

The Committee noted the progress being made.

\* 98 **Children's Services Improvement Plan**

The Committee received the Devon Children's Services Improvement Plan April 2023 – March 2024.

The Devon Improvement Partnership Board was established by the Department for Education in 2020 in response to an Inadequate rating from Ofsted for Children's Social Care Services. The role of the Board was to direct, prioritise, measure and hold accountability for the Improvement Plan and the Devon improvement journey.

In March 2023, the Board agreed to reset its focus and approach to:

- Clarify and create shared understanding of the role and purpose of the Board, particularly with new system leaders and Board members.
- Create the condition for Board meetings to focus on key outcomes and associated actions.

- Create partnership priorities, outcomes and actions to become part of the Devon Children's Services Improvement Plan.

As part of this reset, the strategic Improvement Plan had been updated to incorporate:

- Children's Services Action Plan
- DCC Corporate Services Action Plan
- Partnership Action Plan.

The Improvement Plan set out priority outcome areas for Children's Services, at a strategic and operational level, namely: Change, Leadership, Engagement and Workforce.

Questions raised and discussion with Members and Officers included:

- The challenges of progressing the Improvement Plan, such as being focussed on key elements around staffing, where there was a large number of agency workers and how permanent workers could be secured.
- Confidence that Devon Children's Services, under its new leadership, would have the resources and capacity to achieve the required improvements. However, staffing was critical especially in North Devon due to lack of accommodation and District partners had oversight of this.
- That the Council were supporting the post pandemic research work currently being undertaken by Exeter University - schools were dealing with a lot of post pandemic children but lacked resources, staffing and funding.
- How workforce challenges and the high reliance on agency social workers would impact improved outcomes, the offer from the Social Work Academy on growing own staff; and looking at mentoring for children in care.
- How the Committee could provide additional support to improve progress by inviting partner colleagues to attend Scrutiny, and to focus on good practice and learning from that to develop confidence.

**RESOLVED** that the Improvement Plan be added to the Work Programme so progress could be monitored.

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### **Sufficiency Initiatives for Children in Care and Care Experienced Young People**

The Committee considered the report and presentation given by the Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing on Sufficiency Initiatives for Children in Care and Care Experienced Young People (presentation attached).

The Council had recently secured funding following the submission of two successful bids to the Department of Education (DFE) for the following initiatives:

- The DFE Children's Home Capital Programme – the Council had been awarded capital funding of £733,354 to develop Welland Children's Home and a new children's home at The Link Centre to create five new 52-week placements for complex needs children in care.
- The DFE Staying Close Programme – the Council had secured a grant of £1,147,106 in May 2023, to be used over the next two years to pilot supported accommodation for care experienced young people.

The Committee were asked to consider and comment on the sufficiency initiatives and to review the next steps for each project, as outlined in the report.

Discussion followed with Members and Officers including the greater role that could be played by the Council and District partners, which was being taken forward by the Team Devon agenda.

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

**RESOLVED** that the Committee welcomes the sufficiency initiatives outlined in the report and recommends the programme to Cabinet when it considers the report in July.

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**Children's Standing Overview Group**

The Committee received the report from the Children's Scrutiny Committee Standing Overview Group held on 18 April 2023.

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

The Meeting started at 10.30 am and finished at 1.16 pm