

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17 June 2024

Present:-

Councillors P Sanders (Vice-Chair), T Adams (Chair), J Bradford, C Channon, A Dewhirst, P Maskell, J Trail BEM, R Peart, R Radford, C Slade and C Mabin (Church of England Diocesan representative)

Present – remote

Councillors L Hellyer and M Squires

Apologies:-

Councillors S Aves

Members attending in accordance with Standing Order 25

Councillors A Leadbetter, L Samuel and F Letch

* 149 **Declarations of Interest**

The Chair reminded Members they should declare any interests they may have in any item to be considered, prior to any discussion taking place on that item. [A list of county councillors who are also district, borough, city, parish or town councillors.](#)

* 150 **Minutes**

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meetings held on 25 March 2023 and 1 May 2023 be signed as a correct record.

* 151 **Items Requiring Urgent Attention**

There was no matter raised as a matter of urgency.

* 152 **Public Participation**

There were no oral representations from members of the public.

* 153 **Responses of the Cabinet to Reports of the Committee**

The Cabinet Member for Children's SEND Improvement Services reported that following a successful submission to the DfE regarding the safety valve, the first tranche of funding should be received around the end of June. The

next submission due date would be the end of August and she would further update the Committee at the next meeting.

* **154** **Scrutiny Committee Work Programme**

The Scrutiny Officer updated Members as follows:

- Fostering Task Group – further Members still welcome to join.
- Invitation from Councillor Randall-Johnson for Committee Members to attend the Health & Adult Care Scrutiny Committee on 24 June 2024 at 10.30am to take part in discussions on the Transitions – SEND joint item.
- Reminder for Members to complete the Councillor Recruitment Survey.

* **155** **Election of Commissioning Liaison Officer**

It was **MOVED** by Councillor Adams, **SECONDED** by Councillor Trail and

RESOLVED that Councillor Sanders be re-appointed Commissioning Liaison Member for the ensuing year

* **156** **Children's Services Improvement Plan/Social Care Performance**

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

The Committee considered the report of the Director of Children and Young People's Futures (CS/24/13) with attached Children's Services Improvement Partnership Board report and the Social Care Improvement Plan Performance Measures/Data Set, which was discussed by the Board in May 2024.

The Children's Services Improvement Partnership Board monitored the implementation of both the Social Care Improvement Plan and the Partnership Improvement Plan at its monthly meetings, which included consideration of the performance measures agreed for each of those plans.

The report highlighted a number of areas where performance had and continued to improve, together with the remedial actions being taken by the service.

The Committee was updated as to destination data for Children in Care NEET (not in education, employment or training) in that Devon was no longer an outlier and were now above the national average. Data in this regard was now live and would be shared with Members. Monitoring would continue.

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools updated the Committee on some of the work that had been and was taking place across the whole Service, including:

- Ongoing work with Essex as Devon's improvement partner to help improve the service;
- Most recent Ofsted monitoring letter that stated they were pleased with work in Devon particularly around the front door, and that no children were found to be unsafe.
- Working with National Implementation Advisor for Care Leavers, Mark Riddell MBE, to improve Devon's corporate parenting.
- New Corporate Parenting Local Offer was now live and online; and Devon District Councils had agreed to a Council Tax exemption for care experienced young people.
- Significant progress was being made with the District Councils in regard to housing.
- Work with Exeter College on the offer of apprenticeships.

Members' questions and discussion points with Officers included:-

- That the voice of young children was heard through consultation as part of the audit process; through feedback from the Children in Care Council; and through assessments and visits. Work was ongoing.
- Repeat referrals had reduced further to 23% at the end of May, but recognition that it needed to improve further. Useful discussions had taken place with the Police who were now triaging domestic abuse notifications to avoid sending in re-referrals.
- Explanation that an unregistered placement was one which Devon had provided but which was outside the statutory framework, often used for emergency placements. Devon currently had 13 in unregistered placements for which registered placements were actively being sought.
- The timing of health assessments was an issue for those placed outside Devon; and a recording glitch had now been identified and corrected.
- Devon still had over 100 children in out of country placements some distance away and the team were working hard to bring them back into local placement, however it was noted that specialist placements were only available further afield.
- A lot of work was also ongoing around rebuilding Devon's relationship with its partners and providers.
- An item on Sufficiency was coming to the September meeting.
- Work was also ongoing around quality of supervision, which Essex were helping with and it was proposed that a report on quality assurance come to a future meeting.

The Chair expressed her appreciation to all the officers involved in making the improvements identified in the report.

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

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- a) Welcomes the improvements made across a range of performance indicators as set out in the report and the improved performance of Children in Care in NEET as updated by Officers in the meeting.
- b) Asks that Officers circulate the information on Children in Care in NEET with the Committee.
- c) Asks that a report on the voice of children and young people is added to the Work Programme for a future Children's Scrutiny Committee, and a further update on Quality Assurance is provided at the next Social Care Performance item in November 2024.
- d) Invites the Young Corporate Parenting Lead to a Children's Scrutiny meeting as part of her work to link between care leavers and the Council, extending the invite to any care leaver apprentices to find out about the work of the Committee

* 157 **Children's Services Recruitment and Retention Spotlight Review: Progress report on recommendations**

The Committee received the joint report of the Director of People & Culture and Director of Children & Young People's Futures (LDS/23/18), which reported on the progress made on the 12 recommendations from the Children's Services Recruitment and Retention Spotlight Review.

Points of particular discussion and highlight included:

- Two further agency workers had converted to permanent.
- Social worker recruitment remained a challenge and work was focussed on supporting ASYE recruitment and adopting a 'grow your own' approach.
- A two-year programme was being introduced following ASYE to become an experienced social worker which was hoped would aid retention.
- Agency social worker rates – it was hoped to have a regional pay cap in place by October which would help conversion to permanent.
- The importance of survey completion as part of the People Strategy.

It was **MOVED** by Councillor Sanders, **SECONDED** by Councillor Colin Slade and

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- a) Welcomes the progress made against the recommendations made by the Children's Services Recruitment and Retention Spotlight Review in November 2023.

- b) Supports efforts by Officers to agree the Memorandum of Understanding in the South West region that will cap the rate on agency workers by October 2024.
- c) Asks that the results of the People Survey are shared with Members.

* 158

Children's Social Care Monitoring Visit March 2024

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

The Committee received the Report of the Director of Children and Young People's Futures (CS/24/14), which provided an overview of the Monitoring Visit undertaken by Ofsted in March 2024. This was the 7th Monitoring Visit following the full inspection in January 2020. The focus of the Visit was on Devon's Front Door (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub) and the Early Help and Assessment and Intervention Service which received referrals from the Front Door.

The report summarised that positive progress had been made at the Front Door and the Inspectors recognised the hard work across the Service, however there was much more to do to sustain the changes already achieved and to continue to strengthen and develop practice and ensure the right systems and structures were in place to support this and improve outcomes for children in Devon. The Service was working to an improvement plan which included the recommendations made by Ofsted during the Monitoring Visit.

Responses to Members' questions and discussion points with Officers included:-

- Information Sharing Agreements were in place in principle; and a Front Door Strategic Board met on a monthly basis to discuss and share performance data around information sharing.
- Ongoing challenges remained in the Health system in respect of children receiving mental health support and neurodivergence assessments in a timely manner.
- Guidance for social workers and staff around gaining consent for information at the Front Door had been refreshed; and a focus on partner working around referral consents, which remained a challenge.

The Committee recognised the efforts made by staff and expressed their thanks and continued support to everyone involved.

* 159

Progress on Improving School Attendance

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

The Committee received the report of the Director of Children and Young People's Futures (CS/24/15) on School Attendance in Devon.

The report noted that, nationally, school attendance had become a priority since 2020. Attendance levels had not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. Different cohorts of pupils were disproportionately impacted by this, causing consequent difficulties for some pupils and their families. Devon had limited knowledge of the quality of home education and few levers to address it. There was a strong correlation between poverty and pupils absent from school, and national data showed the huge impact of eventual pupil outcomes if significant periods of schooling was missed. It was known that such pupils were less likely to be safeguarded and more likely to under-achieve in later life.

The report explained that the Department for Education (DfE) had now published fresh guidance (which would become statutory in August 2024) on how to improve attendance levels and had identified key responsibilities for schools, families and Local Authorities.

The report showed the impact on different cohorts of pupils and included some data on school absence for reasons other than illness. It also reported on projects already underway to improve this and some plans to further develop that work in the future.

Since the report was written, indicators were now moving in the right direction: attendance in primary schools was now 0.2% above national average and improving; special schools was now above national average; and the secondary school attendance had improved from 2% to 1.3% below national average.

The two cohorts Officers were most concerned about were the elective home education and persistent absenteeism in key stage 4, which both remained too high. Officers would circulate updated data as of last Friday.

The Deputy Director provided updates that included:

- Devon propose to share attendance data with all schools, including Trust level data;
- It would be mandatory for all schools nationally to sign up to WONDE, an online tool for sharing data.
- A new attendance hub was to be set up in Devon in September, which would be seen as sharing good practice across schools and trusts.
- There would be a Conference taking place in Devon – date to be arranged.
- Devon had a communication plan aimed for in July/August, alongside the DfE one.
- There was a Keeping Children in School project which the Ted Wragg Trust were engaged with.

- Due to concern that Devon only had 3.4 full-time equivalents working in the EHE team, discussions had taken place with Exeter University's Social Mobility Commission, and there had also been involvement with Trusts in setting up their own support for EHE.

Members' questions and discussion points with Officers included:

- Members voiced their alarm at the contents of the report and the number of absences.
- The Service did liaise with the Transport team, but problems did exist in Devon due to its size and rurality; and coastal town deprivation.
- The large list of codes showing reason for absence was set by the DfE.
- Confidence that the Trusts had robust inhouse tracking systems.
- An improvement strategy and plan was in place for improving attendance and would be brought to a future meeting.

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

The Meeting started at 10.30 am and finished at 1.16 pm