

## Report of the Children's Scrutiny Committee: Report of the Standing Overview Group meeting of Monday 29<sup>th</sup> July 2024

Report of the Director of Legal and Democratic Services

---

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Committee before taking effect.

---

### 1) Recommendation

That the Committee be asked to:

- (a) accept this report as an accurate record of the issues explored in the meeting ensuring transparency in scrutiny activities.

### 2) Background / Introduction

The Standing Overview Group of the Children's Scrutiny Committee meets with the purpose of bringing rigour and understanding to complex issues across different services which could not meaningfully explored at public Committee. This is an informal information sharing and member development session where issues are presented to the Councillors to raise awareness and increase knowledge.

To bring transparency, and ensure that Scrutiny is not 'carried out behind closed doors' a short report is brought back to the Committee to highlight pertinent issues and to take forward any actions or recommendations that have arisen.

### 3) Meeting summary

#### 3.1 Devon Children's Services Annual Conversation

The Director of Children and Young People's Futures and the Children's Leadership Team appraised Members of the Annual Conversation with Ofsted, which took place on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2024. The Director highlighted that the meeting is an information exchange between Ofsted and the Council.

The background presentation provided to Members ran through some short summary slides on the service as a whole, the political and financial context, Children's Services Leadership, Children's Social Care, Education, SEND/Alternative Provision. Furthermore, a wider range of detailed service specific sections relating to Children's Social Care and Education were included for Members to view outside of the meeting.

Pertinent points in the report provided and officer comments included:

- Confirmation from Ofsted that our next graded inspection of Children's Social Care will take place in late 2024.
- Officers were aware of our strengths and challenges and Ofsted commented on the quality of our data.
- Ofsted recognised the improved performance, activity levels and stability of the leadership team.
- Improvements on recruitment and retention, including more permanent team managers in children and families teams and 26 new Social Workers in their assisted and supported year in employment (ASYEs) joining the service in September compared to 6 last year.
- Evidencing and developing the voice of the child and young people and the impact of relationships, interventions and outcomes.
- A reduction of the number of children in care to from 906 to 863, and an increase in the number of children accessing Early Help and Family Intervention services.
- Our need to improve the sufficiency of placements, foster placements and external provision of placements. Officers were able to highlight the Council's expansion of children's homes, staying close provision and improving relationships with providers.
- Education and Alternative Provision (AP) – Ofsted asked about our commissioning process and our knowledge about the quality of our AP provision.

Discussion and questions with Members included the following areas:

- The Chair thanked officers for their work and the evident improvements in the performance of the service. The Chair asked if anything pertinent from the subsequent letter from Ofsted arises, it is shared with Members.
- Confirmation that the new intake of ASYEs will have enhanced support for 2 years rather than 1 year. ASYEs are our part of the Grow your Own model to recruit and retain permanent staff. Future ASYE recruitment will depend on the number of vacancies and posts needed, but officers were positive about future cohorts and the opportunity the ASYEs bring.
- Our relationship with higher education and officers highlighted a developing Social Work course at the University of Exeter.
- Members asked about the levels of agency staff in the North Locality. Officers commented that whilst the teams are stable, there is a need to recruit to more permanent staff in the Assessment and Children in Care teams in the Mid/East and North localities. The service will continue with targeted recruitment campaigns and continue to have conversations with agency staff on conversations.
- Officers confirmed that the agency rate cap in the South West region is hoped to be in place by January 2025. It is hoped this would positively impact recruitment and retention as agency staff anecdotally have been waiting for the confirmation of the cap before making a decision on future employment.
- Dental checks for children in care – there is a challenge across the NHS on dentistry and dental care that officers are addressing with health colleagues.
- How the Council is working to speed up adoption processes – Officers commented that the service needs to ensure that we work more closely with the Courts to ensure care order decisions are made in a more timely fashion and also improve the timeliness of children being matched with adoptive parents.

- How the Council is working to improve practice with partners? Officers commented on the partnership working arrangements and working relationships in the Improvement Partnership Board. There is also a need to ensure that the whole system understands the shared responsibilities to safeguarding.

### 3.2 Family Hubs Consultation Update

The Director, Deputy Director – Children’s Health and Wellbeing and Senior Commissioning Officer appraised Members of the Family Hubs Buildings Consultation results in advance of the upcoming decision by Cabinet. The consultation was based on the previous Children’s Centres buildings and not on the development of Family Hubs as Cabinet had already agreed the direction of Family Hubs in October 2023. The consultation ran from 8<sup>th</sup> May to 3<sup>rd</sup> July. At the time of the meeting (July 2024), Cabinet was due to make a decision in August 2024 on the development of Family Hubs and use of buildings. Cabinet subsequently did make a [decision on Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> August](#), to which the Chair attended the meeting to highlight the discussion at this meeting.

The presentation provided to Members covered the timelines so far, an overview of the 766 responses and results, the recommended hub network model, the phased approach to delivering sites, feedback themes and proposed actions/mitigations, the anticipated journey of a family in the service, the continued engagement to develop the model, services included and a further breakdown of results based on location, who has responded and themes.

Pertinent points in the report provided and officer comments included:

- The Director commented on the opportunities that Family Hubs presents for Devon, working with our partners and engaging communities.
- On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, the Children’s Centre contract ended and the Developing Family Hubs contract started on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024.
- 766 responses were received from the consultation and officers carried out a further 14 engagement events.
- A majority of respondents in Mid Devon (76%), Teignbridge (71%), South Hams (76%), Torridge (54%), and East Devon (53%) agreed with the proposals and the majority of changes will take place in Phase 1. Some areas were identified as needing additional work around specific centres, responding to concerns raised.
- Further work is needed in the areas where the majority of respondents disagreed with the proposals – West Devon (80%), Exeter (69%) and North Devon (68%) – and the mitigations and further work needed was explored in the presentation.
- The recommended hub network, main hubs and outreach spaces were shared with Members, along with the planned phases - phase 1 by December 2024 and phase 2 by June 2025.
- The need to work with schools, communities and other services in partnership across Devon to support families in the new Family Hub model and continue to develop the model.
- A reminder that the Family Hub model is a universal service, rather than the 0-8 range of targeted services delivered by Children’s Centres.

Discussion and questions with Members included the following areas:

- Members welcomed the presentation, the opportunity to be updated on the development of Family Hubs and welcomed further updates from Officers as the service is developed.
- The importance of working with communities including church and faith groups. Officers confirmed meetings were taking place with church/faith groups around the County and welcomed additional contributions from Members.
- How the service plans to communicate to families about the service and how to access it? Officers commented on the community partnership across Early Help, Schools and the voluntary sector and the need to link to existing groups with core Family Hub staff so that the links to the Family Hub can be seen and made. In addition, ensuring an online/digital presence, an online request for support form and a telephone line to call to get more information from the service.
- Working with military families in Lypstone and Chivenor to ensure military families are able to access services.

*Action:*

- (a) Officers were asked to canvass Members on local community groups in their divisions.

### 3.3 Independent Reviewing Officer Service Annual Report 2023/24

The Head of Service, Vicki Whitehead, appraised Members of the highlights of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service Annual Report 2023/24.

Pertinent points in the presentation provided and officer comments included:

- The IRO Handbook requires the service to produce an annual report and it is one of 3 reports that the service produces, along with a LADO Annual Report and Child Protection Chair's Annual Report, to identify good practice and highlight areas for further development.
- There were 874 children in care on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, a decrease of children in care from March 2023 but still higher than in 2021/22. This rise is partly attributed to the increase in unaccompanied asylum seeking children.
- The recent decreases in the number of children in care are indicative of service improvement and a system that is taking a more proportionate response to support children and families.
- 1046 children spent time in the care of Devon Children's Services between April 2023 and March 2024.
- Key achievements relating to the quality of practice included pre-review discussions and mid-way reviews are being undertaken collaboratively with social workers; IRO letters to children are sensitive, considered and appropriate; practice observations and dip audits are routinely being completed and feedback is routinely sought from families.
- Key performance information improvements include a new QARSS dashboard being developed and rolled out across the service to support oversight of children, activity and timeliness and that our timeliness of initial child in care reviews are around 95% in time (within 20 working days of entering care).
- Key workforce updates included in the presentation included that the restructure of the service is complete; there is a stable workforce of permanent IRO; regular training and

development sessions have been undertaken by the IROs throughout the year and IROs have decreasing caseloads.

- The 3 key areas for future development are the quality of IRO analysis and planning for children and young people; the transition back to in person meetings and quarterly case supervision needing to be fully embedded in the service.

Discussion and questions with Members included the following areas:

- Members praised the presentation and the overview of the key highlights.
- Working with the Eclipse case management system - whilst improvements had been made to the quality of recording, the service was still developing a one version of the truth narrative and ensuring there is accurate data to improve practice.
- Cabinet agreed in July 2024 to enter into a joint procurement tender process between Children's Services and Integrated Adult Social Care for a new case management system to be rolled out in Spring 2025.
- The QARSS Dashboard is still in development but will help managers with performance and timeliness. Officers would look at whether Members could be given access to the dashboard.
- In person meetings – Whilst it would increase travel time and there is a need to ensure appropriate locations, IRO caseloads are sitting in the recommended range and the improving direction of less children in care would improve this. The service also wants the young person to take the lead on how they want their meetings to be held.

#### 4) Options / Alternatives

The report is the summary of a Scrutiny Standing Overview Group meeting. Scrutiny does not make decisions and this report does not propose any alternatives.

#### 5) Consultations / Representations / Technical Data

As above, there are no specific considerations in regard to consultations, representations and technical data in this report.

#### 6) Strategic Plan

The alignment of all Scrutiny activity with the strategic plan is detailed on the Scrutiny work programme. The issues raised in the report and the benefit of developing member knowledge and the 'critical friend' challenge of Scrutiny contribute to the Council achieving its strategic plan.

Improving Member knowledge on key issues contributes to the Council's commitment to being a trust, inclusive and innovative Council. It ensures good decision making and that the Council listens and learns.

#### 7) Financial Considerations

There are no specific financial considerations in this report.

## 8) Legal Considerations

There are no specific legal considerations in this report.

## 9) Environmental Impact Considerations (Including Climate Change, Sustainability and Socio-economic)

There are no specific environmental impact considerations in this report.

## 10) Equality Considerations

There are no specific equality considerations in this report.

## 11) Risk Management Considerations

The activity of Scrutiny Standing Overview Groups contributes to the mitigations for:

### Ineffective Member Scrutiny

defined as: 'Due to ineffective scrutiny, the level and quality of service management may drop, leading to financial mismanagement or harm to staff and/or citizens and reputational damage e.g. Grenfell.'

### Member Effectiveness

defined as: 'Inadequate member effectiveness due to a lack of training, support and knowledge leads to a lack of challenge to corporate officers and/or poor decision making, resulting in a negative effect on the County's citizens (poor value for money, poor service delivery, harm, etc).'

## 12) Summary / Conclusions / Reasons for Recommendations

The report outlines the topic(s) covered at the meeting of Monday 29<sup>th</sup> July 2024, highlights the key points raised during discussion and details any agreed actions.

The report is formally reported to the Children's Scrutiny Committee in the interests of openness, transparency and good decision making.

### **Maria Price**

Director of Legal and Democratic Services

**Electoral Divisions:** All

Cabinet Member for Organisational Development, Workforce & Digital Transformation:  
Councillor Andrew Saywell

## Local Government Act 1972: List of background papers

Background Paper – NIL

### **Contact for enquiries:**

Name: Charlie Fisher (Scrutiny Officer)

Telephone: 01392 383681 or [charlie.fisher@devon.gov.uk](mailto:charlie.fisher@devon.gov.uk)

Address: G31, County Hall, Exeter.

## Appendix - Attendance

Scrutiny Members: Councillors Tracy Adams (Chair), Philip Sanders, Julian Brazil, Alistair Dewhirst, Linda Hellyer, Pru Maskell, Colin Slade, Jeff Trail BEM and Ms Christina Mabin.

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

Cabinet Member for Children's SEND Improvement Services: Councillor Lois Samuel.

Presenting officers: Stuart Collins (Director of Children and Young People's Futures), Becky Hopkins (Deputy Director – Head of Children's Social Care), Jassi Broadmeadow (Deputy Director – Head of Children's Social Care), Steve Liddicott (Deputy Director – Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing), Ceri Morgan (Deputy Director – Head of Education and Learning), Simon Kitchen (Head of Communities), Leroy Venn (Assistant Director – Transformation and Lead), Vicki Whitehead (Head of Service – Academy, Quality Assurance and Practice) and Beth Simons (Senior Commissioning Officer).

Scrutiny Officer: Charlie Fisher.