

Children's Scrutiny Committee

Quadrennial Report 2021-2025

Chair's Review

This report covers the work and impact of the Children's Scrutiny Committee over the course of the quadrennial term (May 2021-March 2025).

The improvement journey of both Children's Social Care and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) services continued to be monitored closely by the committee across all four years of the term, ensuring that members had assurance of the progress and challenges faced by both service areas.

Members made it a priority to engage with staff in frontline services, speaking to over 150 staff across an annual rounds of visits to staff. The visits ensured that the voice of staff were fed directly back to cabinet to ultimately ensure our services for children and young people are the best they could be.

Children's scrutiny completed a number of in-depth investigative reviews (task groups and spotlight reviews) including the Child Friendly Devon Task Group, SEND Task Group, Children's Services Recruitment and Retention Spotlight Review and most recently, the Fostering Task Group. All of these have expanded members' knowledge and resulted in evidence-led recommendations for change which supported the cabinet and senior leaders to drive forward change and improvements.

Our masterclasses continued to raise awareness of key topics and services, promoted member knowledge in mental health, SEND, early help, public health nursing, the Devon Children's Safeguarding Partnership, the Parent Carer Forum, fostering and the Mockingbird programme.

Responding to the 2021 Ofsted Monitoring Visit letter, scrutiny undertook a review of our practice, resulting in the Children's Scrutiny Action Plan which was then implemented (see more on final page). One year later, during a further visit, Ofsted commented positively on how members provided robust challenge to senior leaders.

As Chair, I want to express my continued thanks to all scrutiny committee members, the previous chairs of the committee during the term (Councillor Rob Hannaford and Councillor Su Aves), Vice Chair Councillor Philip Sanders, the scrutiny team and two special advisors (Kevin Crompton and Melanie John-Ross MBE).

Thanks is also expressed to the witnesses, children, young people, families, cabinet members, officers, and members of the public who engaged with scrutiny over the four years.

Councillor Tracy Adams

Chair of the Children's Scrutiny Committee


Highlights





In person Committee Meetings

- 25** Public meetings, broadcast live
- 86** Substantive item reports
- 0** Call-ins
- 10** Representations from members of the public

Task Groups / Spotlight Reviews

- 6** Reports published
 - 230** Witnesses
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Masterclasses and Standing Overview Groups (SOG)

- 21** SOG Meetings (including Budget Monitoring SOGs)
 - 18** Masterclasses to increase understanding and improve scrutiny
 - 23** Visits completed
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How has Scrutiny listened and learned?

The Children's Services Recruitment and Retention Spotlight Review in July 2023 heard from 25 staff across five teams.

Children's Scrutiny Committee meetings heard 10 representations from members of the public. Representations were made on subjects including SEND and Children's Social Care Services which helped add real life examples to committee meetings.

Members completed an annual round of visits to frontline staff every spring/summer. Overall, members met 151 staff and five service users across 21 visits. For each year, a full report of the findings and recommendations was presented to the committee.

In the 2023 autumn term children's scrutiny visited schools, met six members of staff and 12 students. Discussions covered SEND, access to mental health services and working with the council.

The child friendly Devon task group in 2022 heard from 21 witnesses, including staff, business representatives, young people and Members of the Youth Parliament.

The fostering task group in 2024 heard from 26 witnesses, including staff, foster carers and other local authorities.

Across their work, members heard directly from 24 children and young people and our Members of Youth Parliament (MYP).

Forty four members of staff responded to the SEND Task Group's staff survey and a further four took part in follow-up evidence sessions. These were integral to the findings on the pressure on the 0-25 team and staff capacity.



▲ Recruitment and Retention Spotlight Review (2023)



▲ Members visit to Bideford College (2023)

▲ Members after meeting with Devon Young Carers (2022)



▲ Members taking part in a round robin discussion at County Hall with practitioners from Bridges (2022)



Scrutiny impact



The 2024 children and young people's futures recruitment and retention strategy embedded many of the recommendations put forward by the children's services recruitment and retention spotlight review. This included recommendations on the staff induction programme, supervision, caseloads, reviewing the council's offer to staff, celebrating staff achievements and career progression pathways. .



The committee's critical friend challenge in 2021 in IT systems (Eclipse and MASH Guardian) acted as a catalyst for improvements and a closer working relationship between children's services and digital transformation. .



Cabinet accepted or partially accepted 11 of the fostering task group's recommendations, relating to Devon's offer to foster carers, Mockingbird, the reinstatement of an annual celebration event, developing a foster carer portal system, improvements to the payments system, removing the use of Egress, and promoting best practice within the fostering team.



In the budget processes, members successfully recommended that:



- The budget book risk register is amended to highlight improvements to children's services are dependent on partnership working across the whole system including health, police, district councils and schools.
- The formation of a budget monitoring standing overview group to take a more in-depth look at the budget and the council's financial pressures.
- The council invest in an in-house provision for school transport.



The SEND task group report was used by policy specialists working with the education select committee to prepare MPs for an oral evidence session on the Government's SEND review in 2023. .



The SEND improvement partnership board agreed to widen its improvement plans to create a 'system wide transformation' of services, as recommended in November 2022 by the SEND task group. .



Members have played a key role in the policy formulation behind Family Hubs and continue to lobby for:

- Fairer funding for Devon's schools, SEND and public health nursing services
- The number of agency workers and the introduction of a social worker agency pay rate cap
- Affordable housing for key workers and care leavers
- Expansion of in-house residential placements .



The committee was named in an internal SLT report as the "driving force" behind the council's senior leaders discussing and looking at the issue of affordable housing for key workers. That work became part of the Devon Housing Task Force and Devon Housing Commission.



The local authority's scrutiny committee provides robust challenge to senior leaders. ”

Scrutiny contribution to strategic priorities

- The vast majority of the work programme for children's scrutiny relates to the strategic priority of 'be ambitious for children and young people'.
- Committee meetings have been focused on ensuring oversight of the improvement journey for children's social care and SEND services, alternating at each meeting. This has meant members have been able to keep track of performance data and milestones, provide critical friend challenge to the cabinet and senior leaders each time and be assured of progress.
- Members also invited partners, such as NHS Devon representatives and school leaders to committee meetings to hear from different perspectives and provide critical friend challenge across all parts of the system.

**Be ambitious for
children and young
people**

**Support
sustainable
economic recovery**

- In January, committee members receive detailed budget papers with the purpose of identifying salient issues, examination of the general position of the budget and to make recommendations to the Cabinet and Council. In 2024, the committee established a budget standing overview group to improve member knowledge and understanding, as well as promote good governance and scrutiny. Topics included, the Medium Term Financial Plan, annual budget cycles, placements, education traded services and the SEND safety valve programme.

- The committee's work programme has looked at a range of topics that were important to the council, Devon's residents and communities and partners including: education performance, elective home education, school transport, Ofsted monitoring visits letters, Ofsted annual conversation, recruitment and retention of social workers, early help, sufficiency and placements, corporate parenting and more.
- The children's scrutiny committee's work has continued to hear from frontline staff and children and young people to understand services, current challenges and drive forward improvements by reporting back findings directly to cabinet and including feedback in critical friend questioning.

Children's Scrutiny Action Plan 2021/2022

Children's scrutiny sharpened its approach following the July 2021 Ofsted focused visit, building upon the shifts already in place from the 2019 scrutiny statutory guidance. The resulting children's scrutiny action plan is an evidence-based plan, drawing upon national best practice. The action plan led to 18 actions and work has been carried out against all actions, below is a summary of progress.

ACTION

IMPACT

Information and Intelligence

- Prioritisation of items at committee and standing overview group meetings so active items are considered.
- Taking performance reports at every committee, which is also the same as the improvement partnership board and SEND strategic partnership board, so information is shared across all areas of governance.

- Member-led work programme demonstrating increased focus and time dedicated to the substantive items, the average number of committee items has fallen from five to two.
- Members see regular performance reporting for social care and topical education and SEND reports to ensure oversight of key information at each public committee meeting. This enables oversight and assurance of the service.

Critical friend challenge

- Scrutiny has made good progress in listening to frontline staff and increasing understanding in masterclasses. Scrutiny employs a special advisor to support and highlight key areas and suggest key lines of enquiry.
- The Local's children's Improvement Advisor ran a bespoke session on best practice.
- In-house training sessions delivered sessions on introduction to scrutiny, questioning skills and work programming in addition to continued development 1-2-1 and drop-in sessions.

- The committee has used the feedback, experience and learning to support critical friend challenge to drive improvement to cabinet and senior leaders.
- Member focus on key lines of enquiry.
- Default position of not 'noting' items and ensuring active recommendations for substantive items.
- Continuing to develop members' skills further and embedding good practice in scrutiny.

Impact and follow up

- The children's scrutiny lead officer manages the actions and recommendations made by the committee in a formal log.
- Lessons learnt through this process have been shared with other local authorities through the scrutiny network and the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

- Improved clarity over expectations and requests by the committee and subsequently a better response to councillors.
- The scrutiny team continue to challenge our thinking and practice and further develop a culture of reflective learning. Our learning has inspired other local authorities to challenge their own practice.