

Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 18 July 2023

PRESENT:

Councillor Reilly, in the Chair.
Councillor Carlyle, Vice Chair.
Councillors Mrs Beer, Dr Cree, Dingle, Gilmour, Harrison, McLay, Penrose, Salmon, Stephens and Tippetts.

Also in attendance: Councillor Sally Cresswell and Councillor Jemima Laing, Sharon Muldoon (Director of Children's Services), Annie Gammon (Service Director for Education Participation and Skills), Karen Blake (Head of Service), Martine Aquilina (Head of Service), Ross Jago (Head of Governance, Performance and Risk), Paul Stephens (Performance Advisor), Hannah Daw (Performance Advisor), Matt Fulton (Lead Accountancy Manager) and Jake Metcalfe (Democratic Advisor).

The meeting started at 2.00 pm and finished at 5.00 pm.

Note: At a future meeting, the Panel will consider the accuracy of these draft minutes, so they may be subject to change. Please check the minutes of that meeting to confirm whether these minutes have been amended.

1. **To note the appointments of the Chair and Vice-Chair for the Municipal Year 2023 - 2024**

The Committee noted the appointments of Councillor Zoe Reilly as Chair and Councillor Charlotte Carlyle as Vice-Chair for the municipal year 2023/24.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

3. **Minutes**

The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting that took place on 15 February subject to an amendment to the attendance.

4. **Chair's Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

5. **Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee Terms of Reference**

The Committee agreed to note the Terms of Reference.

6. **Children's Social Care - Improvement Plan**

Councillor Jemima Laing (Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture, Events and Communications) introduced the item to the Committee and made the following key points:

- a) The Improvement Plan was a detailed and comprehensive plan to ensure Plymouth improved its services in the city. Each month the Improvement Board met to hear of and review progress of the Improvement journey;
- b) The Board was chaired Theresa Leavy (Executive Director of People, Dorset County Council) with Councillor Laing (Portfolio holder responsibility) and Councillor Evans OBE (Leader of the Council) in attendance. The Board also had attendance from numerous partners from across the city;
- c) The improvement had not been for just Plymouth City Council but for all key partners including schools, early years, voluntary sector and Plymouth's further education sector;
- d) The Improvement Board had been advising Plymouth it needed to take its practice back to basics. From Plymouth's assessments, to its plans, to its supervision, to its management oversight and clear records on the systems Plymouth uses;
- e) The Board had been working with staff to make changes since January 2023 and work would continue as part of the Department for Education's Improvement notice until such time that the notice expires or ceases.

Sharon Muldoon (Director for Children's Services) presented the report to the Committee and highlighted the following key points:

- f) The measures within the report were reviewed every month by the Improvement Board to see progress in key areas but also systems that required change to improve outcomes for Plymouth's children and young people;
- g) The Council had increased its Early Help cohort and following discussions with schools in the city it was acknowledged that the Council could do more to support children in that space. The Council had increased those teams which were formed and they were working closely with the Education service. This presented a new way of working for the service from a silo one to a more integrated system;
- h) The focussed visit in December highlighted that the Front Door of the service was not working as well as it should in terms of supporting the children of Plymouth but there had also been an issue in terms of consent to make a referral;
- i) An event held by Plymouth City Council on 26 April 2023 had all schools

within Plymouth in attendance where it was reaffirmed the need to work together. Feedback from head teachers across the city had advised that the systems were improving and changing and that the service was much more responsive;

- j) Caseloads within the Children's Social Work service had remained high which decreased the quality of practice. The workforce in Plymouth was relatively new in terms of experience with newly qualified social workers having low caseloads and the more experienced social workers having high caseloads. The Social Work Academy in Plymouth remained at 100% and provided assurance that there remained a steady pipeline for the future;
- k) For the Permanence service who work with children in care, the teams were more stable with more appropriate caseloads. The audit findings from that service point to a better standard of work and the Improvement Plan therefore was orientated to Early Help, Initial Response Teams, and Children's Social Work teams in the Front Door;
- l) The Board looked at the services workforce stability and it had reviewed that sickness levels had reduced over a 10 month period and it was hoped this would further reduce as the right conditions continued to be implemented;
- m) Retention in Plymouth had strengthened, it was recognised that social workers in Plymouth did not leave but were moving to different parts of the service. The Initial Response Teams and the Children's Social Work service were the areas in the service which had been vulnerable to retention issues and due to this, the Council had implemented a recruitment and retention bonus to encourage social workers to remain in that space;
- n) The service had been implementing a structural redesign and was moving to a Targeted Operating Model (TOM) which had been utilised by many good or outstanding local authorities. This would see Plymouth shift to a locality based model which worked closely with schools and early year settings;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- o) The percentage of referrals leading to no further action had seen a considerable increase in the months of February and March 2023. This had been due to process changes through the services quality assurance system and as there had been a tightening of decision making there had been an increase. It was recognised that this was not unusual in an improvement journey but as Plymouth moved through its improvement work it was expected to stabilise over the coming months;
- p) The percentage of single assessments completed within 45 working days for in month and year to date had been moving in the wrong direction. The Committee were advised that this had been due to high caseloads and within the Initial Response Teams there had been higher sickness levels which had also driven higher caseloads;

- q) The number of referrals into the Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) had increased significantly in March 2023 which had been due to a process change;
- r) The KPI reporting within the report had been requiring development, this was being worked on and would be reported to the next scrutiny committee, along with additional reporting measures following feedback from Dorset County Council colleagues;
- s) Social Worker assistant roles had been moving through the process and the service had been in the recruitment phase, it was hoped that the full benefit of those new posts would be seen in the coming months;
- t) The new TOM envisaged social workers to have a caseload of 18, it was acknowledged that this would not be a reality until the service progressed through the improvement journey. Caseloads of 18 would provide the right conditions for practitioners to have adequate time to work with families and make the impact they need to support Plymouth's children and young people;
- u) The workforce had training delivered by Mark Finnis, a restorative practitioner in order to get staff back to strength based practice;
- v) The workforce through feedback, advised that they had felt listened to and could see things changing. It was reported that the improvement journey would take approximately three years to fully implement;
- w) With regards to supervision, the Committee were advised that there had been too many direct reports into a team manager, with one team manager having 15 direct reports. The TOM had addressed this and an additional team manager role had been created for that part of the service;
- x) The Seeking Employment, Education and Training (SEET) strategy was in the beginning phase of being implemented. It was recognised that Plymouth had taken a number of 16/17 years old into care over previous years which had shown a high trend of young people not in education, employment or training and with the service moving to an early help model, it would ensure Plymouth had the right entrants into care;
- y) A pilot incentive scheme would be launched at the end of summer 2023, initially for care experienced young people. The scheme would see a bespoke employability programme launched in Plymouth which would provide intensive work around employability skills with a residential element and some work experience;
- z) The service would look into the rationale behind data points 41 to 44 in order to understand why the aspiration for 100% was not integrated into the plan;

- aa) Timeliness of reviews of children in care had improved from 74.3% to 93.1%;
- bb) Social worker caseloads were reported to be adequate for the Permanence service but that for the Children's Social Work service and Initial Response teams improvement was required to bring down caseloads for experienced social workers;
- cc) The service would be working on a business case to help Special Guardianship arrangements and to prevent the high prevalence of those arrangements breaking down, especially for young adolescents;
- dd) Plymouth City Council went out to tender for the domestic abuse service in spring 2023 but due to missing information within the tender pack in terms of which buildings would be used for the service and the associated costs it, it became difficult for partners to provide a comprehensive bid for that service. The Council has since paused the procurement and met with partners to gather feedback and explore the questions that they had been raising through the procurement process and would relaunch the tender once everything had been clear. The incumbent provider would remain in place with no gap in the service until the process had concluded. Councillors would be briefed prior to the relaunch to provide reassurance;

The Committee agreed to note the report.

7. **Unregistered Arrangements**

Councillor Laing (Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture, Events and Communications) introduced the report to the Committee and highlighted the following key points:

- a) Unregistered placements were used as a last resort by the Council in circumstances where it had not been able to find registered Ofsted provision often due to short notice of placements ending or due to a complex situation on a young persons entry into care;
- b) The service over eight months had made significant progress and would continue to reduce the council's use of unregistered arrangements and drive a culture shift to avoid them. The council would work to find the right placement within acceptable timeframes for those that were already in those arrangements;

Karen Blake (Head of Service for Permanence and Fostering) presented the report to the Committee and highlighted the following key points:

- c) Unregistered placements had never been appropriate or acceptable to the council for its children and young people in care;
- d) The law had changed in September 2021 in which the care planning placement and case review regulations were amended to prohibit the

placement of a child under 16 in such arrangements;

- e) For a small number of cared for children, often with the most complex needs, there had been times where, on the day a placement could not be sought and in those circumstances the service had to set up an arrangement to keep them safe and have their needs met whilst the right placement was actively sought;
- f) The impact on children/young people in unregistered arrangements were significant and the arrangements that they were being placed in were not regulated by Ofsted and would not provide reassurance that Plymouth's most vulnerable children were in high quality, safe and stable homes;
- g) The Council had very tight robust guidance around the setting up of those arrangements and would have leadership management grip on them;
- h) Unregistered arrangements were financially high cost arrangements as to ensure safety, there were higher staffing ratios than would necessarily be required in a registered home;
- i) From 1 June 2022 to 31 May 2023, the Council used unregistered arrangements for 19 cared for children during that time period but individually, were not in those arrangements during that timespan. The youngest cared for child was 11 and the oldest was 17;
- j) The service hit a peak of 14 children/young people in an unregistered arrangement in August 2022 and in June 2023, this had reduced to two young people;
- k) Key themes identified for the council using unregistered arrangements were:
 - Previous placement breakdowns
 - Mental health difficulties particularly around self-harm and suicidal ideation and young people that had required hospital admission
 - Physical aggression towards parents and carers
 - Harmful sexual behaviour
 - Children missing out on education
 - Children that had been adopted or been under Special Guardianship arrangements
- l) The service had worked hard with partners across the city in Health, Education and placement providers to prevent these types of arrangements from occurring or to limit the time spent for Plymouths children/young people in those arrangements;
- m) Following conversations with placement providers in the city it had led to an increase in placement sufficiency for the city and prevented children/young people having to move outside of the city boundaries;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- n) A new provision would be available in summer 2023 through Plymouth's main children's home provider and they would be opening a two bedded crisis home on the outskirts of Plymouth that would offer high end therapeutic support which would provide more options for Plymouth's children should situations of crisis occur;
- o) The council would be opening its Care Experienced Hub, a new model for Plymouth that would see four training flats on the ground floor for 16/17 years olds who were in care and it would have further flats for 18+ care experienced young people. The new Hub would allow young people to move into independence when it was right for them;
- p) The council were procuring a robust quality assurance framework around providers of unregistered arrangements. Whilst it was acknowledged that the council did not want to use those arrangements, whilst it was using them it wanted to be as rigorous and robust as it could be in terms of which providers it used and what the expectations were;
- q) The council were being approached almost daily by providers trying to sell unregistered arrangement services. Through the procurement which was in progress, the council would want to turn most of them down and only have those that provide the best service available;
- r) Ofsted registration of children's homes was a robust process and it was estimated to cost between £500,000 and £1 million to set up a new home due to the requirement of having a full staff team in place with a registered manager as part of the Ofsted inspection and registration process. This had meant that some of providers were not seeking Ofsted registration and due to the national market, the arrangements were still in demand.
- s) A protocol was in place for all children in unregistered arrangements to provide assurance with regards to the arrangement.

The Committee agreed to note the report.

8. **Contextual Safeguarding, Exploitation and Extra-Familial Harm**

Councillor Laing (Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture, Events and Communications) introduced the report to the Committee and Martine Aquilina (Head of Service) presented the report to the Committee and highlighted the following key points:

- a) Plymouth had taken a real focus on its child exploitation work and the workforce had increased. The Reducing Exploitation and Absence from Care and Home (REACH) team had increased from three full time equivalents up to seven full time equivalents and were now placed amongst the services adolescent support and youth justice teams which had equally grown in size to ensure a robust response team to child exploitation;

- b) Usual child protection ways of working did not work for children/young people experiencing extra familial harm and the service needed to take a different response. Plymouth adopted the Adolescent Safety Framework (ASF) in January 2022 but there had been issues in embedding the framework across the city and the service was actively refreshing the training to support that;
- c) It was difficult to obtain data from the Police in relation to County Lines as it was very fluid but it was known that there were two to three county lines coming into Plymouth and the service was actively working with Devon and Cornwall Police to disrupt that, but it was acknowledged county lines would never go and would be a constant piece of work for the service;
- d) Sexual exploitation had increased significantly during the spring 2023 and the service had been training and retraining its workforce to be more curious around sexual exploitation;
- e) Knife crime in the city had not been hugely prevalent and the service has seen two young people in the last 12 months relating to knife crime and a further six young people were stopped or arrested in the same period;
- f) The ASF would be combined with Plymouth's strategic base and its operational Missing and Child Exploitation Group to ensure Plymouth adopted the new approach;
- g) Reviews were taking place with the Police to ensure data collection was appropriate as Plymouth had gaps;
- h) Children going missing had been on the increase which had been due to the summer;
- i) Increasing the workforce in this area would allow for greater chance of developing relationships with those that go missing and it was acknowledged that children in the care of the local authority were more likely to go missing than those not in care;
- j) Daily intelligence briefings (DIB) were introduced due to an increase in some of the risk associated with some young people. Briefings would take place the Police Child Protection Team, Youth Justice Service, Edge of Care service, REACH service and Health. More partners from the city were attending the briefings;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- k) Where a child/young person was arrested with drugs as part of County Lines activity, the Police would seek to treat them as victims and not as perpetrators in the first instances. The service would attempt to work with those young people through early intervention youth justice service and an prevention team;

- l) In 2023, Plymouth did not have any missing unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). If there were any missing for more than 24 hours, Plymouth would immediately convene a strategy meeting with Police attendance with subsequent daily review meetings;
- m) The service was working proactively and closely with education colleagues to get children/young people back into education as it was known they would be safer;
- n) The service ran a 'lets talk teenagers' program which was free and helped professionals and families to understand the triggers, signs and symptoms of exploitation. A booklet was produced which all schools in Plymouth could have access to;
- o) The Early Help service was seeing an increase in the workforce and capacity which would allow the service to have link workers within schools;
- p) The service actively completed a lot of prevention work with young people and would be building a group work program to help young people think about how the dangers and risks of carrying knives;

The Committee agreed to note the report.

9. **Performance Scorecard and Risk Register**

Ross Jago (Head of Governance, Performance and Risk) presented the report to the Committee and highlighted the following key points:

- a) There were six red risks which would increase to seven and the new risk concerned CaterEd, which fell within the remit of Children's Services. There had been increasing costs due to cost of living issues, inflation, energy costs and increased costs to food pricing. There were concerns of its long term sustainability;
- b) There was a red risk scored at 20 for 'failure to meet statutory duties due to growing volume and complexity of demand for Children's Social Care services'. There was however additional mitigation provided such as enhanced oversight of the improvement plan and service redesign which was underway;
- c) Further risks included:
 - Sustainability of the Schools Improvement Partnership which would be removed from the risk register but monitored;
 - and failure to deliver required improvements following an Ofsted inspection.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- d) The council would seek to recruit to an Interim Director of Children's services following the resignation of Sharon Muldoon (Director of Children's Services) before looking to recruit to the permanent Director of Children's Services position. The service also had an interim Service Director for Children, young people and families but below that there was a professional, dedicated and passionate workforce who wanted improvement to happen;
- e) The Department for Education had been happy with the improvement plan and the improvement work that was underway;
- f) Tracey Lee (Chief Executive) was chairing the Children's Services Transition Board on a fortnightly basis in which key people within the service were meeting to discuss progress and ensure the improvement journey was continuing in the same trajectory;

Paul Stephens (Senior Performance Advisor) presented the Performance Scorecard to the Committee and in response to questions it was reported that:

- g) 74% of looked after children and young people would be within 20 miles of the city, those that are outside of the city would have reason to be there either because they were in a specialist provision or because they had extended family elsewhere. There had been placement sufficiency difficulties for 16/17 year olds which had meant that some young people were living outside of the city;
- h) The service had implemented a new edge of care offering for the city which was seeing a reduction in the number of 15/16 year olds coming into care;
- i) The reduction in the number of children on Child Protection (CP) plans had followed a review of the cohort in ensuring that there was no drift or delay for those families. The number of children on CP plans had stabilised since the reports release and the service would continue to monitor the data in relation to families on repeat CP plans;
- j) Plymouth had launched its attendance strategy which would dovetail with the national strategy and would look to get children back into school which COVID seemed to have affected. Attendance workers from the Council would start working in localities and would work with children/young people that had the most severe absence (attendance below 50%);
- k) The council was issuing fines for children that were taken on holidays during school term time.

The Committee agreed to note the report.

10. **Finance Monitoring Report**

Councillor Laing (Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture, Events and Communications) introduced the report to the Committee and Matt Fulton (Lead Accountancy Manager) presented the report, highlighting the following key points:

- a) The Children and Families budget for 2022/23 was set at £51.381 million and the final outturn was £55.793 million with a resultant overspend of £4.412 million primarily due to the cost and volume of an independent sector placement and an unachieved delivery plan, they were offset by saving in different areas within the service;
- b) They had been a trend of overspend since 2018/19;
- c) There had been an overspend in 2021/22 of £9.802 million which was offset by COVID funding. Continued costs from the increased care entrants in that period had continued as some children remained in the care of the local authority;
- d) The Education, Participation and Skills team budget for 2022/23 was set at £10.749 million with the final outturn positioning being £12.353 million and an overspend of £1.604 million due to pressures of home to school transport and SEND short breaks;
- e) The combined pressure for Children's services was £6.016 million;
- f) For 2022/23 the budget for unregistered and bespoke arrangements was £1.529 million however there had been an adverse variance of £3.716 million. Costs were reducing in this area since October/November 2022;
- g) There was a residential placement overspend of £1.3 million last year with the supported living cohort having close to a £1 million overspend;
- h) The Children, Young People & Families service was given a budget uplift of £3.053m in 2023/24 to allow for expected cost & volume pressures within Placements, resulting from increases to National Living Wage, Cost of Living & Inflation. However additional Medium Term Financial Planning targets were also identified by the service of £4.575m, to give a net budget decrease of £1.732m;
- i) Education, Participation and Skills were given a budget uplift of £1.370m in 2023/24 to allow for the additional pressures within Home to School Transport and SEND Short Breaks;
- j) Members were advised of savings proposals for the 2023/23 year of £1.732 million for Children and Families budget and £3.942 million for Education, Participation and Skills;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- k) They would be changes in attendance duties for Local authorities that come into effect in September 2023 but there was no additional funding allocated as part of the required changes;

The Committee agreed to note the report.

11. **Work Programme**

The Committee agreed to add the following to the work programme:

- Not in Education, Employment or Training Strategy and Seeking Employment, Education or Training Strategy;
- COVID legacy for children in education
- Cost of Living – Education

12. **Tracking Decisions**

The Committee agreed to note the action log.