

Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

Thursday 10 October 2024

PRESENT:

Councillor Reilly, in the Chair.

Councillor Wood, Vice Chair.

Councillors Mrs Beer, Gilmour, Krizanac, McLay, McNamara, Simpson, Steel, Stephens and Tippetts.

Also in attendance: David Haley (Director of Children's Services), Temilola Salimon (Service Director for Children, Young People and Families), Lisa Linscott (Service Director for Education, Participation and Skills), Jim Barnicott (Head of Education and Virtual School), Martine Aquilina (Head of Service, CYPF), Isabelle Kolinsky (Service Manager Inclusion and Welfare), Siobhan Logue (Safeguarding Business Manager), Rob Williams (Tedd Wragg Trust), Scott Simpson-Horne (All Saints Academy), Anita Frier (Stoke Damerel Community College), Shaun Nichols (Widley Court Primary School), Peter Lewis-Cole (Lipson Vale Primary School) Councillor Victoria Cusworth (Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council) and Elliot Wearne-Gould (Democratic Advisor).

The meeting started at 2.02 pm and finished at 5.02 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.

64. **Apologies**

There were no apologies.

65. **To note the appointment of Vice-Chair for the 2024/25 Municipal Year**

The Panel agreed to note the appointment of Councillor Wood as Vice-Chair for the 2024/25 municipal year.

66. **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Gilmour declared a personal interest and was employed by NASUWT union.

67. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting that took place on 18 July 2024 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

68. **Chair's Urgent Business**

There were no items of Chairs urgent business.

69. **Inclusive Practice to address exclusions and suspensions in Plymouth**

Councillor Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Apprenticeships) introduced the item to the Panel and highlighted the following key points:

- a) There was a significant rise in the rate of permanent exclusion and suspensions in Plymouth, and although rising nationally, Plymouth's permanent exclusions was above national and regional benchmarking;
- b) Plymouth was working collaboratively to develop the conditions for success and inclusion in its schools;
- c) More than 80% of children and young people who were permanently excluded in Plymouth schools were known to children's social care in the previous six years;
- d) More than 50% of children and young people who were excluded or suspended from school had low rates of school attendance, special educational needs and disabilities or were eligible for free school meals or Pupil Premium;
- e) Children were at a greater risk of being suspended or permanently excluded when they made the transition to secondary school from primary school;
- f) Secondary school children who were permanently excluded were more likely to live in areas of the city with high levels of deprivation;
- g) 43 exclusions were prevented in 2023/24 through partnership work with schools in the city;
- h) There was a robust primary school escalation process in relation to permanent exclusions and since summer 2024, there have been no permanent exclusions for primary school children;
- i) Since April 2024, there were no permanent exclusions for vaping of substances controlled under the misuse of drugs act;
- j) The combination of system change projects would look to drive the city's collective ambition to reduce the rates of permanent exclusions and suspensions in the city;
- k) The early language acquisition project was a highlight of the on-going work which would support the development of children's language so they were better able to communicate within their setting, reducing behaviours that could increase the risk of exclusions;
- l) A new vulnerable pupils panel was a partnership between Education, Health, Police and children's social care providing early help and prevention to

support children and remove barriers to their access and engagement;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- m) There was a citywide commitment to Trauma Informed training for all school staff. Most schools made adaptations to their behaviour policies or behaviour and relationship policies to ensure all children were supported with trauma informed practice;
- n) Practices within schools ensured children were supported in a therapeutic way. Practice had moved to establish secure relationships with all children in schools;
- o) The Panel heard from Lipson Vale Primary school that they introduced a powerful tool called 'the window of tolerance' which educated children from reception that everybody had a window of tolerance but this changed based on the experiences in and outside of school. The school also taught its pupils how to communicate with their trusted adult/s when they were feeling outside of their window;
- p) The Panel heard that children in the city were being provided language to best describe their wishes, feelings and emotions as well as restorative approaches in school. Children were being taught consequences and how negative actions would result in negative consequences;
- q) The trauma informed approach within schools was seen as a long term gain in order to develop secure attachments with children to ensure they can trust their trusted adult;
- r) Issues of permanent exclusions and suspensions were often intergenerational and All Saints Academy had set up a community hub to enable happy communities;
- s) Flexibility in the curriculum and flexibility in arrangements within primary schools was seen as a contributing factor to low rates of permanent exclusion in those schools;
- t) Secondary schools in the city were seeing children and young people presenting with trauma over a number of years. Secondary schools were able to provide some levels of therapeutic support, but often these children and young people required more intense levels of support which was difficult to provide due to decreasing budgets;
- u) Children and young people required quicker responses from CAMHS and other medical support to enable them to attend school in relation to mental health difficulties due to attachment issues. Secondary schools often provided a range of welfare support for children and young people such as learning mentors and counsellors;
- v) A secondary school was providing a minibus in the morning to enable

relationship building and the requirement to be a friendly face in the morning. There was also an outreach worker who built relationships with children in the home, so when they did return to school, there was a friendly and recognisable person to who they could go to;

- w) Some secondary schools had already implemented their own Alternative Provision (AP), or were looking to establish one within their settings. AP would run different curriculums and could include English, Maths and Forest school. They could also run at different points in the day in a smaller class size environment;
- x) There was an on-going training programme within schools across the city to improve attendance;
- y) The Vulnerable Pupil Panel looked to find appropriate solutions for children and young people and to get them back into school as quickly as possible, in a place where they would succeed;
- z) Although the data suggested that the issues of exclusions and suspensions were concentrated at secondary school, much of the issues faced, although at lower levels, presented at primary schools;
- aa) Schools in the north and west of the city, with the highest levels of deprivation, had the highest levels of exclusions, suspensions and elective home education. Schools in the north and west were investing to make the difference with those young people. It was reported to the Panel that during the lockdown period, there was a fracturing of connection and belonging between children, communities and schools. The Place Based Working Group were looking at strategies to address some of the underlying contributing factors for permanent exclusions and suspensions;
- bb) Plymouth was working with the University of Plymouth and Plymouth Marjons to look at some of the research that had taken place around the country where local authorities, schools and Trusts had been successful;
- cc) Schools were building high quality tier two support for its most vulnerable children;
- dd) Schools were ensuring enhanced transitions throughout of key stage transitions;
- ee) It was reported to the Panel, that for some students all the offers might not work for them, but schools needed to provide an offer which focussed on core subjects as well as providing a vocational offer;
- ff) The Place Based Working Group would be looking at cross phased, cross setting work with other agencies to begin to work across the system rather than focussing on just secondary schools;
- gg) It was reported to the Panel that schools in the city were not suspending

children from schools due to breaching the uniform policy. It was suggested that suspensions may have occurred due to the response of being challenged;

- hh) It was reported that schools in the city had a significant and sudden issue around Vaping and the use of illicit substances including THC and spice, which caused a number of significant medical responses. Public Health did respond to the request to investigate and schools in the city sent the same letter to all parents and carers to make them aware of the sudden and significant issue that developed within the city. Police were checking vapes that were confiscated but had also provided education via assemblies across Plymouth
- ii) SHARP were commissioned by Public Health to work with those young people using those substances in vapes;

Action: Further data would be provided under appendices one and two of the report and would provide ten years worth of data and include comparisons with Portsmouth and Exeter.

The Panel agreed to note the report.

70. **Elective Home Education in Plymouth**

Councillor Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Apprenticeships) presented the report to the Panel and highlighted the following key points:

- a) Elective home education could be a rewarding experience, but provided a number of challenges and families in Plymouth needed to make an informed choice;
- b) Plymouth had seen an increasing number of children being registered as home educated which was reflected nationally;
- c) The rise in the number of children being withdrawn from school to be home educated was a concern in Plymouth particularly for those in their secondary phase of education;
- d) The causal factors were wide ranging and complex and to fix, required collaboration across the multi-agency partnership to hold families and outcomes for children at the centre;
- e) There was a significant rise in the numbers of children with special educational needs being withdrawn from schools for home education. Rises were also seen with children with mental health difficulties where parents had a lack of confidence in how schools were supporting their child;
- f) The majority of children in who were home educated in KS4 attended the Plymouth City College provision which provided an alternative to the formal national curriculum offer of mainstream secondary school;

- g) 90% of children who were home educated were either severely absent or persistently absent from school before being home educated and 37.4% of those home educated were known to children's social care within the previous six years;
- h) Plymouth worked collaboratively with families and monitored children who were home educated. The partnership supported children who were missing education to return to school as a result of the relational approach. 153 children were supported to return to their school provision in 2023/24;
- i) The Council continued to strengthen the partnership to support vulnerable children to remain in school and was working in partnership with the three Plymouth universities to undertake a research project in home education. The learning would create a preventative system to support children while they were in school;
- j) A robust plan approved by the Plymouth Education Board measured the city's progress against key performance indicators on a monthly basis;
- k) The Place Based Working Group was developing a three tier alternative provision strategy;
- l) All schools were in contact with their link early help worker and allocated access and attendance officers, to develop plans for children who had barriers to school attendance.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- m) The number of children that were being home educated and part of groups was a small number;
- n) The local authority was responsible in ensuring that there were no children in the City's boundaries missing education. It was not a requirement for families to provide evidence of their child's home learning, but the authority would be minded to consider that child might not be receiving any education;
- o) Where there was intent of the parent/carer has decided to home educate their child, the local authority would reach out to those parents/carers to talk through the decision to ensure it was a positive and informed choice. An initial monitoring check would take place after three months to understand the families plan for educating their child at home. If the evidence of education was suitable, monitoring would take place annually;
- p) The Council was hosting information and guidance sessions where families were positively engaging;
- q) The relational practice undertaken in the city was having a much more positive impact compared to the more punitive measures such as school attendance orders;

- r) Due to the limitations of legislation, it was difficult for the local authority to see what was happening in terms of education for those children. The Department for Education guidance advises that home educators were able to educate their children at home in whichever way they saw fit which included 'unschooling' where the child was enabled to fully break from any form of education and when ready, they could then engage in a form of education in the home;
- s) Prior to the Covid pandemic, the more traditional home educators, were also home educated as a child. Since then, parents/carers have advised that they did not believe in what the schools had to offer or they were struggling themselves to navigate the complexities of their child's mental health;
- t) Officers were confident that the local authority was operating within the government guidance for elective home education and the safeguarding surrounding that which was represented in the ILACS inspection.

Action: A Councillor briefing session on Home education would be arranged.

The Panel agreed to note the report.

71. **Children, Young People and Families Service Improvement Plan 2024-25: QI Progress and Impact Report**

Councillor Laing (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications) introduced the report with additions from Temilola Salimon (Service Director for Children, Young People and Families) to the Panel and highlighted the following:

- a) The Improvement Plan aligned with the strategic priorities of the Achieving Excellence Plan for 2024 – 2027;
- b) The plan enhanced the timeliness and outcomes of children's social care services in Plymouth and outlined the key achievements, challenges and priorities for Q2;
- c) There were on-going efforts to stabilise and improve services with a strong emphasis on partnership working, quality assurance and continuous improvement to ensure the best outcomes for children and young people in Plymouth;
- d) Support to Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) improved, with quality interventions ensuring they received a good level of service following increased levels of trauma;
- e) Social work assessment quality had improved substantially and took into account all factors within the family;
- f) The Out of Hours service received strengthening and was a critical area of the service;

- g) Plymouth needed to stabilise its workforce to ensure all the positive work undertaken was maintained;
- h) Plymouth needed to continue the timeliness of quality of supervisions.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- i) Targeted recruitment of foster carers would be able to support children with complex needs;
- j) If Plymouth followed agreed quotas, it would expect the population of UASC to rise by 53, equating to 0.1% of the children population in Plymouth. The service was expecting a rise in the numbers of UASC coming to Plymouth which would reflect the trends seen nationally;
- k) Plymouth had struggled to recruit to the out of hours service which was reflected across many other local authorities due to its niche working patterns. Plymouth was not successful in recruiting to the permanent position of Team Manager and was relying heavily on locum practitioners. Plymouth was investigating and trying to find new ways to advertise those positions to ensure a bigger reach and visibility;
- l) There would be government changes to agency workers and Plymouth had begun the conversation with current agency workers to try and bring them into the fold of the more permanent workforce.

72. **Family Homes for Plymouth Children**

Councillor Laing (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications) presented the report to the Panel and highlighted the following key points:

- a) The report outlines the progress and strategic initiatives undertaken by Children's Social Care to transform practice for children at risk of entering care;
- b) The report emphasised the importance of improving placement sufficiency and outcomes for children and young people, ensuring that they were looked after in family homes in and close to Plymouth;
- c) This programme of work addressed the local authorities sufficiency aim to provide the right number and types of placements to meet the needs of children in care;
- d) The report highlighted the increased demand for services due to generational neglect, mental health issues and substance misuse. The report outlined steps taken to enhance foster care recruitment support for complex needs and market development for residential care;

- e) Key objectives included keeping children within their family networks where possible and increasing the number of in house foster carers, reducing the reliance on high cost residential placements;
- f) The programme focussed on ensuring value for money and improving outcomes for children by providing stable family based care settings;
- g) The local authority would be implementing the Mockingbird model in relation to its in house foster care offer.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- h) The Council was beginning to pursue its own residential care as an option. Not only was it expected to provide a cost benefit, but most importantly, it would allow children and young people that came into the care of the local authority to remain in Plymouth and to maintain their own networks and identity;
- i) The council were trying to engage families that were already in kinship arrangements to ensure they had the right support available to them;
- j) Future reports would include case studies within reports;
- k) Plymouth continued to drive its recruitment of foster carers;
- l) Funding was received from national government for the cohort of UASC in Plymouth's care but was also covered by the council's own budget;
- m) The Virtual School also received funding for UASC as part of Pupil Premium funding plus for their education;
- n) The issues around placement's required a national discussion with government. It was felt that although Plymouth had attempted to reduce costs, the council had gone as far as it could within the national frameworks and legislation and government needed to address the issues faced by many local authorities including Plymouth;
- o) Increases in the cared for children population in Plymouth was multi-factorial including COVID, generational neglect, continued patterns of social care involvement which were never resolved despite interventions, cost of living and poverty;
- p) Early Help, preventative interventions for teenagers undertaken by the local authority was having a significant impact in preventing those young people entering care;
- q) Plymouth had seen a significant increase in the number of families in care proceedings over 26 weeks and conversations were happening with the judiciary in Plymouth. It was recognised to be a national situation with the delays due to the COVID pandemic;

- r) The Council employed a court progression officer who monitored all court cases undertaken by the local authority, to help bring the number of families in court proceedings over 26 weeks down to appropriate levels.

The Panel agreed to:

1. Recommend that Plymouth City Council collaborates with Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council in the delivery of in house residential provision;
2. For the Fostering service to provide information on the recruitment of foster carers and to encourage them to be champions of Fostering.

73. **QI 2024/25 Performance Report**

Paul Stephens (Performance Advisor) and Susan London (Performance Advisor) presented the report to the Board and in response to questions raised it was reported that:

- a) LGA inform would provide councillors with data, over a number of years and councillors would be signposted to this.

The Panel agreed to note the report.

74. **Plymouth Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report 2023-2024**

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

- a) The Plymouth Safeguarding Children's Partnership consisted of statutory partners such as the Police, Health, Children's services and Education alongside other non-statutory partners;
- b) In December 2023 Working Together to Safeguard Children, the national guidance informing partner agencies how they were required to keep children safe was refreshed and published;
- c) The new guidance have direction for how the annual report for the partnership would be published each year in September and it would be representative of the previous financial year;
- d) The report would be further supported by the publication of the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements in December, which would describe the responsibilities of each agency in respect of safeguarding children;
- e) The report identified the need for more partnership data and analysis as well as further work required in embedding new tools for practitioners in some agencies.

The Panel agreed a recommendation for:

- I. The Chair of the Plymouth Children's Safeguarding Board to write to faith groups in the city to be part of the Board.

75. **Early Help**

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

- a) In 2021, the multi-agency vision for Plymouth 'A Bright Future' 2021 – 2026 was published which outlined how local partners supported the best outcomes for all children;
- b) Plymouth's Early Help vision was to ensure that every child and their family could access and receive timely and effective support from trusted sources with the aim to build supportive trusted relationships around families and communities, addressing diversity and equality. This would provide equal life chances for all children in the city of Plymouth;
- c) The delivery of early help and prevention was a fundamental project in the One Children's Service Programme, which aimed to, in collaboration with key city partners build on the existing early help offer and delivery of Family Hubs.

In response to questions raised it was reported:

- d) There were nine family hubs open in the city with another due to be opened by December 2024;
- e) Training would be on-going to help practitioners in the city to open up conversations around domestic abuse in order to address it appropriately;
- f) Undergraduate social workers were linking in to Family Hubs and the Early Help service, which was providing a good positive learning experience for them as they progressed through their social worker journeys;
- g) The service was asset mapping across the city to determine where there was further need in the city for early help provision.

The Panel agreed recommend:

- I. That a whole council briefing on early help be arranged which would contain information on what was available within Plymouth's communities.

76. **Youth Justice Service**

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

- a) Plymouth's Youth Justice service was a multi-disciplinary team that was funded through contributions from the Youth Justice Board, Plymouth City Council, Police, Health services and Probation;
- b) Plymouth Youth Justice service was aligned to the core principles set out in a Bright Future, for Plymouth children to be safe, happy and to achieve and aspire;
- c) There were significant achievements in 2024 in relation to improving outcomes for children in the city, including low numbers of children in custody, fewer children and young people entering the youth justice system, a reduction in children re-offending and those accessing education, employment and training remained high when compared to the national average;
- d) Working in partnership with the police, children's social care, education and community youth, the diversion scheme was preventing children and young people entering the criminal justice system;
- e) The HMIP inspected Plymouth's youth justice service in 2022 and was impressed by the progress made who in turn provided an overall rating of good. A visit by the CEO of the youth justice board highlighted strong partnership working amongst other things.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- f) Around 41% of young people involved with the Plymouth Youth Justice service were exploited. The response had been positive, with Police colleagues working hard over a two year period to ensure that those young people being exploited were victims and not perpetrators;
- g) Partners across the city were attending daily intelligence briefings which was well attended and very child centred;
- h) Plymouth did not follow the national trend in rising knife crime and this was monitored six monthly with the Police;
- i) There had been a regional rise in female violence with Plymouth seeing a 20-22% rise and work was on-going to understand the reasons behind that. There is evidence to suggest that there were females gangs targeting, assaulting and videoing attacks on lone males and females;
- j) The service was in the process of developing a programme for females that were violent as there were none in the country.

Action: Councillors of the Panel would be invited to be introduced to the detached youth service team, before receiving a briefing and then having the opportunity to go out with them and be part of some of the work undertaken.

Action: Female violence programme added to the work programme.

The Panel agreed to note the report.

77. **Work Programme**

Councillors added the following to the work programme:

- School uniform policy
- Free School Meals eligibility

The provision of play equipment and the availability of sites to play would be put forward to the Scrutiny Management Board.

78. **Tracking Decisions**

Councillors were provided with an update in relation to the action log contained within the report.

79. **Exempt Business**

The Panel did not enter part II discussions.

80. **Confidential Minutes**

The confidential minutes of the meeting that took place on 18 July 2024 were agreed as a true and accurate record.