

Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

Wednesday 16 July 2025

PRESENT:

Councillor Blight, in the Chair.

Councillor Wood, Vice Chair.

Councillors Allison, Krizanac, McNamara, Ney, Noble, Steel, Stevens and Taylor.

Apologies for absence: Councillor McLay

Also in attendance: Councillor Laing (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications), Councillor Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Participation and Skills), David Haley (Director of Children's Services), Amanda Davis (Service Director for Education, Participation and Skills), Isabelle Kolinsky (Head of Education), Lisa McDonald (Head of SEND), Karen Blake (Head of Service, CYPFS), Martine Aquilina (Head of Service, CYPFS), Stuart Hogg (Practice Manager), Participation Member, Sarah Wilson (Service Manager for Youth Justice), Hannah Pugliese (NHS Devon ICB), David Brown (University Hospitals Plymouth), Tracey Clasby (Livewell Southwest), Heidi Price (Early Years Representative) and Jake Metcalfe (Democratic Advisor).

The meeting started at 5.30pm and finished at 8.36pm.

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 Appointment of Chair and Vice-Chair for the 2025/26 Municipal Year**

The Panel agreed to note the appointment of Councillor Blight as Chair for the 2025/26 municipal year. The Panel also agreed to note the appointment of Councillor Wood as Vice-Chair for the 2025/26 municipal year.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

| Name | Minute Number | Reason | Interest |
|------------------|---------------|--|----------|
| Councillor Noble | 8 | Employer was University Hospitals Plymouth | Personal |

3. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting that took place on 06 February 2025 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

4. **Chair's Urgent Business**

There were no items of chairs urgent business.

5. **Children's Services Achieving Excellence Improvement and Transformation Plan**

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

- a) Achieving Excellence was an aspirational three-year plan for children's services which was developed in early 2024 which had extensive engagement from staff, from children and young people;
- b) The plan included ten strategic priorities aimed at improving children's social care, education services, and partnerships;
- c) Key milestones were set for 2024 to 2027, aligning with recent Ofsted inspection priorities;
- d) The plan aimed to enhance outcomes for children and young people in Plymouth and strengthen workforce and system capabilities;
- e) Progress was reviewed at the end of the first year, highlighting improvements in social care support, SEND services, and school attendance;
- f) Priorities and milestones were reset for 2025-2026 to maintain progress and the plan would continue to monitor progress against strategic milestones. The plan would also ensure consistent engagement with stakeholders to refine priorities;

Stuart Hogg (Practice Manager) highlighted a few key points before questions were put to Councillors Laing, Cresswell and officers by the participation member. A summary of the discussion included:

- g) Emphasised the importance of consistency in social care services;
- h) Young people expressed concerns about frequent changes in social workers and the impact on relationship building and having to tell their stories more than once;
- i) The service reviewed worker changes regularly and aimed to increase permanent staff to reduce turnover;
- j) Family First reforms were designed to minimise disruptions and ensure continuity of care;
- k) Cabinet members supported increased funding to reduce caseloads and improve consistency. Cabinet wanted to see increased numbers of

permanent staff within the service to ensure every child or young person had a consistent worker;

- l) Handover procedures were discussed to ensure smooth transitions when changes needed to occur. Where the worker was off sick for a period of time, the team manager would be expected to step in;
- m) David Haley (Director of Children's Services) discussed the integration of the '10 Wishes' framework into supervision practices. Managers and workers were encouraged to reflect on how they applied the 10 Wishes into their work;
- n) Suggestions were made to include feedback mechanisms and QA processes to track the implementation of the ten wishes into social workers practice;
- o) Significant changes were made in fostering services, including financial support and council tax allowances;
- p) Fostering summits were held to gather feedback and implement changes collaboratively across the partnership and with foster carers. Consistency in practice and workforce culture was emphasised;
- q) The Mockingbird model was introduced to create an extended family support model for a group of foster carers and the children they looked after. The first constellation went on holiday for a weekend which went well. Further plans were made to expand the Mockingbird model and monitor its impact;
- r) Investments from the Council were made into social activities budgets;
- s) The Corporate Parenting Board was strengthened and there were high aspirations to address cross-organisational issues within that forum;
- t) More children were in placements either in Plymouth or very close to, to ensure that they were closer to much of their established networks;
- u) Plans were discussed to improve outcomes for care leavers in health, accommodation, education, and employment;
- v) A Care Leavers Hub was being developed to provide centralised support;
- w) The Corporate Parenting Strategy and Local Offer were revised with young people's input;
- x) There were efforts to improve the introductions to personal advisors sooner and more smoothly;
- y) Efforts would continue to be made to increase employment and training opportunities. Businesses and organisations were engaged to support young people's aspirations;

- z) Care Leavers were able to access free prescriptions and dental care provided by the Peninsular dental school;
- aa) Concerns were raised about informing young people not involved in participation groups and it was suggested to produce newsletters, digital communications, and one-off engagement opportunities;
- bb) Social workers were encouraged to promote participation and share updates with the children and young people they worked with.

In response to questions raised by councillors it was reported that:

- cc) Social worker caseloads were lower than historical levels, but the target was to reduce caseloads to 12–14 children which would enable more meaningful engagement and better outcomes. Reforms aimed to shift the focus from thresholds of harm to children's needs, allowing social workers to build stronger relationships and reduce crisis situations;
- dd) The importance of reducing the Council's reliance on agency staff and increasing permanent social workers to improve consistency and retention was a priority. Investments made into Children's Services was made with the expectation of lowering caseloads;
- ee) The 300% rise in Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) escalations reflected improved oversight and formal reporting, ensuring concerns were addressed promptly;
- ff) Plymouth had 11 static family hubs and planned to open 11 satellite hubs into parts of the city where there were no static hubs;
- gg) Care-experienced young people were encouraged and financially supported to pursue higher education, which included bursaries of £1,000 per term, graduation costs, and additional support for postgraduate studies. Further support offered to care experienced young people included mentoring and early engagement;
- hh) The Care Leavers hub was funded primarily through the Youth Investment Fund.

Actions:

1. A briefing report would be written to show how the service has improved the quality assurance processes to be more explicit about the difference the service was making for children and young people by discussing The 10 Wishes in social work supervision.
2. Vivien Lines would speak with the participation member around ideas to engage more young people to seek their view.
3. Social worker appraisals in the summer would discuss how they were learning about the views and aspirations of children and young people.

6. **Youth Justice Annual Report**

Councillor Laing (Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications), Martine Aquilina (Head of Service) and Sarah Wilson (Service Manager for Youth Justice) introduced the item and highlighted the following points:

- a) Plymouth City Council was required to publish a Youth Justice Plan annually after consultation with partner agencies;
- b) The plan aligned with key local strategies including the Safer Plymouth Partnership, Devon and Cornwall Police and Crime Plan, and the Children's Commissioning Strategy;
- c) The Youth Justice Service operated within the wider children, young people, and families service to ensure holistic support for early help and prevention;
- d) The service aimed to support children on the cusp of entering the criminal justice system and those already involved to prevent reoffending;
- e) A committed and proactive management board oversaw the service, ensuring robust strategies and partnership approaches;
- f) The plan marked the first year of a new three-year plan to improve outcomes for children and the community. The aspiration was to be one of the best youth justice services in the country;
- g) Key achievements included strengthening early help and prevention, reducing first-time entrants, and maintaining low re-offending rates;
- h) Victim support services were enhanced to provide multidisciplinary support to victims;
- i) Efforts were made to improve transitions for young people moving from youth justice to adult probation services;
- j) The service successfully transitioned to a new case management system;
- k) The team remained committed to a 'child first' approach and worked to embed this philosophy across partner agencies;
- l) Daily intelligence briefings were held to monitor and act on cases involving missing children, homelessness, and custody;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- m) The Youth Justice Board planned to prioritise disproportionality related to care-experienced young people and children with SEND needs. Targets were to be set during the board away day in September 2025;

- n) SEND colleagues were integrated into the Youth Justice Board, which included a speech and language therapist who provided training to magistrates;
- o) The cohort of children in the Youth Justice Service remained small, with 16 on statutory orders and 51 receiving prevention work;
- p) Disproportionality in ethnicity was previously addressed, reducing from 14.9% to align more closely with the school population (approx. 9%);
- q) Speech and language support was enhanced to improve understanding;
- r) A dedicated care-experienced police officer collaborated daily with the Youth Justice Service to monitor children in custody, missing children, and those entering the system;
- s) A daily intelligence briefing was held at 9:30am every morning involving education, health, substance misuse specialists, and police to coordinate actions for vulnerable children. The briefing model was adapted from Bradford Children's Social Care and became a best practice example in Plymouth;
- t) The Youth Justice Service emphasised early intervention and prevention to reduce statutory interventions;
- u) Offences were often linked to underlying harm and deprivation. A multi-disciplinary team worked holistically with families to address root causes;
- v) Mental health concerns were addressed through CAMHS workers embedded in the service. It was suggested that young people required more mentoring and coaching to focus on their emotional well-being and providing the ability to build trusted relationships where some young people hadn't had one;
- w) Persistent engagement with adolescents was key to building trust and reducing re-offending.
- x) A Youth Violence Champion was appointed to work with the OPCC and Safer Communities to deliver targeted programmes in schools. The champion role was supported by partnerships with detached youth teams and neighborhood policing units.

Action:

- 1. A briefing report would be provided around disproportionality and would include further information including a deeper analysis. The report would also reflect on gender and girls and how the service was adapting to meet the needs of groups of young people. The action plan to address disproportionality would also be provided.

7. **Performance Scorecard**

Councillor Laing (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications) and Councillor Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Educations, Skills and Apprenticeships) introduced the item and highlighted the following key points:

- a) Plymouth processed 2,848 referrals in the 12 months to March 2025, down from 3,879 the previous year. Re-referral rates increased to 26.9%, indicating families needed more sustained support;
- b) 361 children were subject to child protection plans, equating to 69.5 per 10,000 which was significantly higher than national and statistical neighbor averages;
- c) 530 children were in care at the end of March 2025, up from 513 in 2024. 44.2% were placed outside Plymouth, with 13% living outside Devon and Cornwall. Efforts were underway to develop local fostering capacity and residential provision to reduce out-of-area placements;
- d) 7% of care experienced young people were in unsuitable accommodation, lower than national and regional averages but still required improvement;
- e) 90.8% of Plymouth schools were rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, with primary schools at 94.2% and secondary schools above the national average;
- f) School absence rates remained above national levels at 7.9%, with persistent absence affecting 18.8% of pupils. Children with special educational needs faced 38.2% persistent absence. A place-based plan was being developed to address transitions and early identification of at-risk pupils to reduce absence;
- g) 46.3% of children achieved strong passes in English and Maths at GCSE, slightly above the national average. The average attainment eight score of 46.2% exceeded national and regional statistical neighbours averages showing strong academic progress;
- h) 92.3% of 16–17 year olds were in education, employment or training, with strong performance for young people with special educational needs at 91%;
- i) Supported internships and bespoke offers were provided to ensure vulnerable groups transitioned successfully to adulthood.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- j) Absences due to part-time timetables were still recorded as absences, in line with the Department for Education's guidance. The ambition remained to reduce the number of part-time timetables across the city. Children that were on part-time timetables were actively tracked, with a particular focus on those open to social care. A fortnightly review process was launched to monitor children on part-time timetables for more than six weeks;

- k) The Council's offer to young people seeking education employment or training was bespoke and aspirational, tailored to each young person's needs, with successful examples such as Discovery College supporting transitions into employment;
- l) Rob Williams (Tedd Wragg Trust) would be invited to a future scrutiny meeting to present the predictive risk model for attendance. Attendance was identified as a major concern requiring focused attention and grip.

Actions:

- 1. Data to be provided over a longer period of time on key highlights such as the numbers of children in care to factor in pre and post-COVID;
- 2. A briefing for members of the Panel would be arranged on attendance which would include a Q&A session and more in-depth data around attendance. The briefing would also look to provide members of the Board with and understanding of the roles of local authority schools and multi-academy trusts in tackling attendance.

8. **Local Area SEND Improvement Plan**

Councillor Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Apprenticeships) introduced the report and was supported by Amanda Davis (Service Director for Education, Participation and Skills), Lisa McDonald (Head of SEND), Isabelle Kolinsky (Head of Education), Hannah Pugliese (NHS Devon ICB), Tracey Clasby (Livewell Southwest) and David Brown (University Hospitals Plymouth). The following key points were highlighted:

- a) Strengthened governance and accountability was obtained, embedding co-production with families and young people through the 10 Wishes framework;
- b) Improved communication of the SEND duty system, significantly reduced call rates and inbox backlogs.
- c) Doubling of EHCP timelines of issuances with improved adherence to the statutory 20-week timeline;
- d) Implementation of a targeted funding model which supported over 300 learners without EHCPs, with positive feedback from headteachers and SENCOs;
- e) There were investments from the into autism, speech and language services, and improved access to CAMHS;
- f) Preparation for adulthood included 67 supported internships with 100% employment and training outcomes which was nationally recognised for best practice;

- g) Monitoring links between exclusions, elective home education, and proactive reintegration support had improved significantly;
- h) The Local Area Partnership developed the Plymouth Graduated Approach to Inclusion (GATI) tool to support inclusion. The GATI tool had been shortlisted for a national award;
- i) Challenges identified included pressures on specialist placements and independent special educational needs provision. There was also a rising demand for neurodiversity assessments and speech and language therapy, with a shortage of educational psychologists nationally. There continued to be increasing numbers of children that were electively home educated or were on part time timetables;
- j) Next steps included finalising and implementing the SEND action plan, preparing for Ofsted reinspection, reducing EHCP backlog, improvement of the annual review timelines as well as expanding the early help and waiting well offers;
- k) Since the July 2023 SEND inspection, partnerships across health and education sectors had been key to the improvements;
- l) The SEND improvement plan had been largely actioned, and the focus had shifted to gathering evidence of impact. The partnership was praised in the Department for Education's stocktake and governance reviews;
- m) The health system was having to respond, adapt and change to address the larger number of children being referred for assessments when compared to pre-covid levels.

In response to questions it was reported that:

- n) Governance processes had been strengthened and decisions in relation to EHCP's were communicated within 24 hours. The next phase when the decision to assess was no, team meetings with the family, schools or education settings and Families first would be held and to have live meetings to discuss the outcome;
- o) There was an importance of targeted funding and alternative curriculum pathways for children without EHCPs;
- p) The outreach offer by special schools was highlighted as a key support for mainstream schools. Impact reports showed improved engagement and satisfaction among families;
- q) The council needed to track government changes to EHCPs and the SEND strategy;

- r) Live sessions with families were being expanded to provide regular opportunities for questions and feedback. Written responses would be provided to ensure transparency and continuity;
- s) The definition and implications of elective home education were clarified in that parents assumed full responsibility for their child's education, which did not involve school resources or adherence to the national curriculum;
- t) The number of children being electively home educated (848) had risen significantly post-COVID, however it was reported that in 2024/25, 187 children had been successfully reintegrated into school;
- u) The importance of timing and communication in preventing elective home education was emphasised. Schools were working to identify key transition points and support families earlier to maintain school engagement;
- v) There was recognition of the importance of belonging, enjoyment, and safeguarding in school environments. These were identified as central to improving attendance and outcomes.

Actions:

- I. The service would provide a report on the governments plans for the future of SEND and EHCP's and how those changes would be communicated to families in the city. This would also be added to the work programme for a future Panel meeting.

9. **SEND Capital Programme**

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

- a) At the heart of the Council's SEND strategy was the principle that children should experience a deep sense of belonging and, wherever possible, attend school close to home alongside their peers. The capital programme aimed to create environments that supported this vision;
- b) The Council looked to use educational philosophies such as the Reggio Emilia approach, which viewed the environment as a third teacher, and research from the Interior Design Educators Council, described the built environment as a fourth teacher, particularly in supporting children with autism;
- c) The report provided high-level detail of available SEND capital and existing commitments to enhance learning environments. It demonstrated a clearer understanding of children's needs and the types of environments required to support them;
- d) Inclusion remained a priority for the Council but recognised that some children required specialist provision to thrive. The strategy aimed to manage the spectrum of need, with a focus on maintaining specialist provision;

- e) The Government had allocated £740 million of capital nationally to create 10,000 new SEND spaces, including expanding specialist units in mainstream schools and building new places in schools. This formed part of a wider £6.7 billion education capital settlement aimed at improving school infrastructure and access;
- f) Plymouth was considered ahead of the curve in its approach, including the establishment of a neurodivergence task and finish group led by Professor Karen Goldberg;
- g) The Department for Education encouraged councils to use capital funding to create places in local mainstream schools, reducing reliance on expensive independent provision.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- h) The average cost range of independent specialist placements was £68,000, with a spread of £54,000 to £98,000;
- i) Significant work was underway to ensure Millford school remained fit for purpose, including the development of satellite provision. In the event of emergency closure at any school in the city, the Council would face financial burdens but was working on alternative strategies and at pace;
- j) The High Needs Block was a national issue, largely driven by specialist provision costs. The strategy aimed to reduce reliance on independent placements by increasing local capacity and early intervention;
- k) The trajectory and overspend was dependent on how quickly the strategy could be delivered. Early intervention was key to reducing future costs and improving outcomes;
- l) While the maintained estate was at its limit, satellite and outreach options remained viable if further specialist school placements were required;

Actions:

- I. A briefing would be organised for councillors on the Dedicated Schools Grant.

Recommendation:

- I. The Committee supported Councillor Cresswell in writing to the relevant Minister and other relevant Government officials to request clarity and additional capital funding for specialist SEND provision in Plymouth. The letter would highlight the Council's proactive work, including early intervention, satellite provision, and inclusion strategies, and emphasise the urgent need for local capacity to reduce reliance on independent placements.

10. **School Readiness**

Councillor Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Participation and Skills) introduced the report and highlighted the following key points:

- a) The Best Start in Life Strategy, aimed for 75% of five-year-olds in England to reach a good level of development by 2028. The strategy promoted holistic family support and early intervention to close developmental gaps before children entered the classroom.

Key initiatives outlined included:

- I. The Best Start Family Service, integrating digital and community-based support;
 - II. Local Best Start Plans, co-produced with councils and communities to tailor services to local need;
 - III. Expansion of 30 hours funded childcare for working parents;
 - IV. Introduction of free breakfast clubs and school-based nurseries to enhance wraparound care and early learning opportunities.
- b) The impact of breakfast clubs in Plymouth schools was praised, noting their role in providing children with a settled and nutritious start to the day;
 - c) The report emphasised that school readiness was a holistic concept, encompassing social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. It involved children's ability to separate from carers, express needs, interact socially, and demonstrate physical independence and curiosity;
 - d) Achieving school readiness required a collective city-wide effort, involving families, schools, early years settings, and community services.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- e) Early language acquisition was a key focus across partnerships, including the SEND board and family hubs. The importance of early interaction, rhymes, and singing was highlighted;
- f) The Dolly Parton Imagination Library project, provided monthly books to children under five in the city's five most deprived wards. Nurseries and childminders were trained to use the 'Talking Time' programme from Oxford University to support language development;
- g) Transition work through the Transition Portal helped to identify and support children before they entered foundation classes. Schools had adapted provision post-COVID to accommodate children at varying developmental stages;
- h) There were reported improvements in toileting readiness for 2025, although it was still acknowledged as an ongoing national challenge. This was attributed to some delays in development to the disruption of routines during COVID-

19 and the role of family hubs in promoting positive parenting practices was emphasised;

- i) Heidi Price advised that the transition time between nurseries and primary schools depended on their relationships with one another. Heidi advocated for school-based nurseries to create seamless transitions and highlighted the ongoing transition project aimed at building children's confidence in new settings.

Action:

- I. The Dolly Parton library would be communicated out to Plymouth City Council councillors in order to promote the project to the wider community. The Communications team would also be engaged to promote this to the wider community.

11. **Action Log**

The Panel agreed to note the progress of the action log.

12. **Work Programme**

The Panel agreed to add:

- Children's services use of AI