

# **Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel**

**Tuesday 9 December 2025**

## **PRESENT:**

Councillor Blight, in the Chair.

Councillor Wood, Vice Chair.

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

Apologies for absence: Councillors McLay and Ney.

Also in attendance: Councillor Sally Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Participation and Skills), Amanda Davis (Service Director for Education, Apprenticeships and Skills), Lisa Davies (Service Director for Children, Young People and Families), David Haley (Director of Children's Services), Louise Jenkins (Lead Accountancy Manager), Isabelle Kolinsky (Head of Education and Virtual School), Councillor Jemima Laing (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications), Vivien Lines (Project Consultant), Siobhan Logue (Safeguarding Business Manager), Susan London (Performance Advisor), Jake Metcalfe (Democratic Advisor), Paul Stephens (Senior Performance Advisor) and Victoria Whitman (Head of Service for Strategic Int and Planning).

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and finished at 8.35 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.*

## **24. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **25. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting that took place on 08 October 2025 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

## **26. Chair's Urgent Business**

David Haley (Director of Children's Services) advised the Panel of the recent Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspection which monitored progress made by the partnership in delivering recommendations from the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Action Plan. The following key points were discussed:

- a) The full inspection had taken place in June 2023 and had focused on a series of recommendations and key areas for improvement identified;

- b) It was not possible to share the outcomes of the inspection as they remained provisional. The draft report was expected in the first week of January 2026, with publication anticipated at the end of January or beginning of February 2026;
- c) The final report and any subsequent improvement plans would be included on the agenda for the next meeting;
- d) Thanks were expressed to all those involved in the inspection process, noting that the inspection had gone well due to strong organisation and thorough preparation. Significant evidence had been provided to the inspection team, including at least 100 documents;
- e) The inspection team had spent three days on site, during which they held extensive meetings with individuals across the partnership, visited family hubs, alternative provision settings, and met stakeholders at all levels within the city;
- f) Inspectors had received strong reflections of the work undertaken over the past two years to improve responses and services for children, young people, and families with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND);
- g) Councillor Blight thanked officers for their hard work and commended the efforts made to represent Plymouth positively during the inspection.

27. **Q2 2025/26 Performance Report**

Paul Stephens (Senior Performance Advisor) and Susan London (Performance Advisor) presented the Quarter 2 Performance Report covering July to September 2025.

- a) Paul Stephens highlighted that the report included several new elements following feedback from the previous committee meeting:
  - i. A more detailed breakdown of the distance children were placed away from home, which had previously only been reported as “in or out of Plymouth” or “more than a certain distance”;
  - ii. Additional information on Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) timeliness, specifically six-week and 22-week measures;
  - iii. An extra source of national benchmarking data added to the second-to-last page, bringing the total to four sources for comparative analysis;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- b) EHCP timeliness performance for six-week and 22-week targets remained well below the national average. A trajectory plan existed and would be supplied to the Panel;

c) Members expressed appreciation for the inclusion of benchmarking material and the expanded scope of data, noting that it was informative and useful for scrutiny.

**Action:**

- Officers to provide the EHCP timeliness trajectory plan to the committee.

The Committee agreed to note the Quarter 2 Performance Report.

**28. 2025/26 Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny - Quarter 2 Finance**

Louise Jenkins (Lead Accountancy Manager) presented the Quarter 2 Budget Monitoring Report for Children's Services to the Panel and highlighted the following key points:

- a) The report set out the financial position for Quarter 2, including growth allocations received at the beginning of the year and savings proposals within Children's Services. There was a significant budget movement in the quarter of £3.3 million and explained that the report detailed the reasons behind this variation.
- b) The service continued to face significant financial pressures due to rising costs associated with independent specialist and residential placements. Those challenges were compounded by limited placement availability both regionally and nationally, alongside increased demand for services within the city. Strategic workstreams had been initiated to mitigate those pressures, including:
  - i. The Family Homes Programme;
  - ii. Enhanced fostering and recruitment campaigns;
  - iii. Strengthened collaboration through the Reconnect Partnership;
- c) There were also staffing challenges in securing permanent appointments, resulting in the use of agency and interim staff to maintain service continuity. A service redesign was underway to align with the expectations of the Family First Partnership;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- d) The costs of some residential placements reflected accommodation, staffing ratios (which could be as high as three or four staff per child for complex needs), and additional therapeutic interventions or activities. It was noted that some children did not require residential care but were placed there due to shortages in fostering placements. The costs of placements were significant and driven by market conditions where demand outstripped supply;

- e) The government was considering mechanisms to address profiteering, as highlighted in Josh MacAlister's independent review of children's social care. While cost capping was not proposed, discussions with providers were ongoing to find a more equitable approach;
- f) Fostering recruitment remained critical to reducing reliance on residential placements;
- g) Fostering information would be sent out to all households in the city within Council Tax mailings and this had been done previously and would be considered again;
- h) The £12.603 million figure in the report represented net growth in the children's budget for the year (after accounting for £17.5 million growth and £4.9 million savings). The projected overspend at the end of the year was £3.731 million. It was noted that forecasting remained challenging due to the demand-led nature of the service, but improvements had been made in recent years;
- i) The statutory overrides for the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) had been extended for two years and further detail was expected in the forthcoming SEND White Paper;
- j) Joint funding arrangements for an unregistered placement costs were shared 50:50 with Health partners.

**Actions:**

1. Officers to ensure fostering information is included in Council Tax mailings;
2. Officers to arrange DSG training for committee members.

**Recommendations:**

The Panel agreed to:

1. Note the Quarter 2 Budget Monitoring Report for Children's Services;
2. Write to government regarding concerns over placement costs and market conditions;
3. The Committee supported continued efforts to promote fostering recruitment and endorsed the inclusion of fostering information in Council Tax communications.

29. **Plymouth Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report 2024-2025**

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

- a) The report detailed the differences made for children, how the partnership implemented learning, funding arrangements, independent scrutiny, and an

update from the Young Safeguarders. It was also noted that the Young Safeguarders had attended a recent meeting with around 40 partners from across the city, describing their contribution as a masterclass in speaking truth to power and commending their challenging demands and data insights;

- b) The involvement of young people was not a tick-box exercise and emphasised the genuine influence they had on partnership work. The report was supported by the forthcoming publication of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, which would set out the responsibilities of each agency;
- c) The report highlighted the impact of multi-agency working through “Making a Difference” sections, showcasing examples where partners had improved outcomes for children and families. The continuous learning, both locally and nationally, had strengthened the partnership, with the annual conference attended by 140 practitioners from multiple agencies;
- d) There was an extensive multi-agency training programme offered by the partnership, with feedback demonstrating its importance for effective safeguarding practice and workforce development;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- e) The partnership sought free venues wherever possible for the annual conference, but the requirement for large spaces for 140+ attendees with facilities for group exercises was difficult to find in the city. Members were invited to suggest suitable venues. It was confirmed that refreshments were included in the cost. It was also noted that accessibility for attendees, including headteachers, was a key consideration when hiring the venue;
- f) The Panel were positive on the inclusion of case studies, stating that they provided tangible examples of how multi-agency safeguarding worked in practice. It was also, noted that safeguarding was one of the most important responsibilities of the Council and that the report demonstrated significant progress in partnership engagement, including new involvement from faith organisations;
- g) Siobhan Logue (Partnership Manager) acknowledged the length of the report but explained that statutory guidance required detailed content. It was confirmed that the Department for Education had recognised Plymouth’s annual report as an exemplary example under the Working Together 2023 guidance;
- h) It was suggested to increase the number of training courses and places offered to allow more practitioners and community representatives to participate, noting the positive impact of safeguarding awareness across sectors.

**Actions:**

1. Siobhan Logue to review and resolve access issues for conference materials on the PSCP website.
2. Officers to explore options for free or low-cost venues for future conferences.
3. Consideration to be given to expanding the safeguarding training programme to increase participation.

The Committee agreed to note the Plymouth Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report 2024/25.

### 30. **Families First Partnership Programme of Reforms**

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

- a) The Families First Partnership represented a system-wide reform of family support focused on early intervention and a whole-family approach;
- b) The programme aimed to ensure that all families, regardless of background or complexity of need, could access the right help at the right time through a connected system spanning universal, targeted and statutory services. The model brought together targeted early help, child in need and child protection into a seamless continuum, with family help lead practitioners maintaining consistent relationships and multi-agency child protection teams providing statutory oversight where required;
- c) Family group decision-making approaches were central to the transformation, building family and community capacity to support families to thrive. The approach supported dynamic, needs-led planning and aimed to reduce duplication and escalation into crisis. Local implementation with key partners was progressing well, supported by engagement events and partnership working groups established for each reform area;

Lisa Davies (Service Director for Children, Young People and Families) added:

- d) The reforms were informed by lessons learned from serious case reviews and tragic child deaths, which had highlighted the need for improved expertise and systemic change to protect the most vulnerable children. The importance of combining early intervention with specialist expertise for children at risk of harm was emphasised;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- e) Locality working would enable services to build strong relationships with local support systems, including schools, midwives, and community organisations, and adapt resources to meet local needs. The 10 Wishes would remain central to the reforms;

- f) Plymouth had a strong existing family hub network and the reforms would align with the direction the city was already pursuing;
- g) Satellite hubs were already in place and further rollout was planned. Outreach models and commissioned services were being used to extend provision closer to families;
- h) Family hubs supported children from pre-birth to age 19 (and up to 25 for young people with SEND). The importance of communication was acknowledged and plans were outlined for a communications strategy, including website updates, videos, and social media content, ahead of the April 2026 implementation deadline;
- i) Governance for the reforms sat with the Families First Partnership Board, which reported to the Safeguarding Partnership Board. The scrutiny panel would continue to have a role in monitoring progress of the reforms.

**Actions:**

1. Officers to provide details of the satellite family hub rollout plan;
2. Officers to develop and implement a communications strategy to promote the reforms, including information for parents of older children;
3. Add Families First Partnership reforms to the work programme for 2026.

The Panel agreed to note progress towards implementation of the Families First Partnership reforms.

31. **Children's Homes for Plymouth Programme**

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

- a) In November 2024, the Leader agreed capital investment for the development of children's homes in Plymouth and was going to help the council tackle profiteering by independent sector care home providers;
- b) The programme would provide high-quality Council-run children's homes in Plymouth. The report detailed progress made over the past year and lessons learned. The first home was expected to open soon, despite delays caused by Ofsted registration requirements, which were identified as a key risk;

Victoria Whitman (Head of Service for Strategic Int and Planning) added:

- c) The design and cost considerations for Project C, which involved a £3 million capital investment for a four-bedroom specialist home were highlighted. The build was highly specialised, incorporating features such as anti-ligature fittings, magnetic locking systems, privacy screens, calming environments, and

breakout spaces to balance safety with a nurturing atmosphere. The design aimed to allow full capacity without compromising safety or wellbeing, given the complexity of the children's needs;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- d) The cost associated with the specification of the build was essential to meet the needs of children at risk of deprivation of liberty and to avoid hospital-like environments. It was confirmed that a significant contingency had been built into the budget to manage unforeseen costs. The Council had also secured £1.5 million of Department for Education (DfE) funding through a competitive process, which was match funded by the Council to the sum of £1.4 million which was a fantastic opportunity for Plymouth;
- e) The council was acting as a corporate parent to its looked after children and the council should provide the best possible care for its children;
- f) The homes could potentially generate income by accepting placements from other authorities in the future.
- g) It was confirmed that a pipeline of future homes was being developed, with a second home secured and a bid planned for additional capital investment to fund a third home;
- h) Savings as a result of the programme would offset growth lines in the revenue budget and borrowing costs would be managed within the directorate's budget;
- i) Recruitment was underway for positions within the children's homes, with interviews planned for early 2026 and start dates in April 2026. Retention was challenging but it was stressed that creating high-quality environments would help retain staff. The service had plans to grow its own managers through training and development opportunities;
- j) Salaries were competitive and included enhancements for unsocial hours, although private providers often offered additional incentives;
- k) The Panel raised concerns about delays in Ofsted registration and asked whether the process could start before building completion. It was confirmed that applications could only be submitted once buildings were complete and Ofsted's current timescales were 6–12 months for emergency applications and 6–18 months for standard applications. The Council would emphasise the urgency of registration and maintain quality assurance for any unregistered placements;
- l) Plymouth City Council had engaged with neighbouring councils and visited other provisions to learn from their experiences of setting up their own provisions;

**Actions:**

1. Officers to provide a briefing for Members on the complexity of needs for children who would be placed in Project C;
2. Officers to explore a workforce development programme for registered managers in partnership with Human Resources and Organisational Development;
3. Officers to continue engagement with other local authorities to share learning and best practice.

### **Recommendations:**

The Panel agreed to:

1. Endorse the development of Council-run children's homes in Plymouth;
2. Write to Ofsted to express concern about registration delays and request consideration of process improvements;
3. Note its support for further capital investment to expand Council-run provision.

32. **Achieving Excellence - Children's Services three year strategic plan, review of progress in year 2 Quarter 1 & 2**

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

- a) The Achieving Excellence strategy was developed following the Ofsted inspection of Children's Services in January 2024, with wide engagement from staff, children and young people. Scrutiny had received its first update on progress against the ten agreed priorities in July 2025, when children and young people had held officers to account for their progress and ambition to create an equal, kind and safe city;
- b) Good progress continued to be noted, including improved arrangements for children with SEND and children in care, and an effective approach now in place to implement the Families First Partnership reforms. There however continued to be challenges, particularly high demand in some high-cost areas such as short breaks, children's placements, and the proportion of care leavers not yet in education, employment or training. The plan was being refocused to ensure the right activity was in place to respond to current pressures;
- c) The strategy was a three-year plan built from the Ofsted inspection, with extensive consultation across Children's Services and the Council. The ten strategic priorities remained constant throughout the plan and were underpinned by annual milestones. There was strengthened governance

arrangements and progress in key areas such as SEND improvements, capital programme delivery, and partnership working;

- d) Key achievements in Quarter 1 and Quarter 2, included:
  - i. Extension of family hubs and satellite sites, providing more early help and support for families;
  - ii. Development of a more inclusive approach for SEND, including the Plymouth Graduated Approach and targeted funding supporting 380 children across the city;
  - iii. Significant impact from targeted funding, reducing suspensions in secondary schools by 38% and improving attendance, sense of belonging and attainment;
  - iv. Launch of the Belonging Framework with headteachers to improve attendance, noting Plymouth's overall attendance had improved by 0.8%, bucking national trends;
  - v. Creative approaches to engaging priority groups of young people in education, employment or training, while acknowledging challenges for care leavers;
  - vi. Issuing 200% more Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) than 2024, achieving 100% timeliness for six-week targets;
  - vii. Delivery of 523 SEND places, including targeted funding placements;
  - viii. Improved transition experiences for children moving between educational phases, with Plymouth's model attracting regional interest;
  - ix. Progress on recommissioning alternative provision and participation in the national attendance campaign, with Plymouth chosen as one of four local authorities nationally;
- e) The success of the Mockingbird fostering model was highlighted, with three constellations supporting 40 children and no placement breakdowns reported within them. The model provided additional support for foster carers and stability for children;
- f) There was significant progress in developing the Families First front door, enabling earlier intervention and more appropriate responses for families. The commitment to family-led decision-making, including the use of Family Group Conferences and mediation to prevent escalation into care proceedings was noted and they were having a positive impact which would be expanded further;
- g) Councillor Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Apprenticeships and Skills) shared feedback from a recent school visit, where staff praised the

targeted funding model for its impact on children's confidence and engagement, describing a "ripple effect" across the school community;

- h) There were ongoing challenges, including sustaining improvements in attendance for vulnerable groups and increasing engagement for care leavers in education, employment or training.

**Actions:**

1. Officers to continue monitoring progress against the ten strategic priorities and report back at the next scheduled update.
2. Officers to maintain focus on attendance improvement and care leaver engagement as priority areas.

**Recommendations:**

The Panel agreed to:

1. Note the key strengths, challenges and next steps identified in the report;
2. Endorse the continued implementation of the *Achieving Excellence* strategy and its alignment with the Families First reforms.

33. **Elective Home Education Deep Dive**

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

- a) The report examined key trends, pupil characteristics and safeguarding considerations, highlighting strong correlations between Elective Home Education (EHE) and persistent absence, SEND needs and social care involvement;
- b) The report set out the Council's statutory duties under the Education Act 1996 and aligned with the Plymouth Education Strategy to ensure every child received a suitable education. While EHE remained a legal and valid choice for families, Plymouth continued to experience higher rates than national and regional averages, with 2% of statutory school-age children educated at home;
- c) Steps had been taken to strengthen oversight and engagement, including expansion of the EHE team, implementation of a new safeguarding framework and collaborative work with schools to reduce unnecessary withdrawal. Early signs of improvement were noted following the accelerated action plan, and forthcoming national reforms were expected to introduce a compulsory register and stronger powers for local authorities;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- d) While no formal data existed, anecdotal evidence suggested some parents cited working from home as a factor in their decision to electively home educate their children;
- e) The decision to electively home educate was always made by parents, although officers explored reasons for deregistration and offered support where appropriate;
- f) The main anticipated reform was the introduction of a compulsory register, but there was no indication that parental rights to home educate would be removed in any upcoming Bills;
- g) Child mental health was a key driver for parents choosing EHE, although parents were not required to provide a reason;
- h) The link between EHE and deprivation, SEND and mental health, was highlighted and officers tracked patterns by school and engaged proactively with schools and families to prevent breakdowns and return children to education where possible;
- i) Family hubs and community providers offered sessions for EHE families and the Council facilitated networks to prevent isolation;
- j) Many families provided excellent home education but it was stressed that the recent increase was driven by parents feeling they had no other choice, which the Council aimed to address through early intervention and partnership working;
- k) EHE was a collective priority for the Multi Academy Trust (MAT) Chief Executive Officer (CEO) strategic group and proactive dialogue was taking place with CEO's to understand drivers and strengthen the accelerated plan;
- l) The Council could escalate concerns in relation to MAT's to the Department for Education, particularly in cases of off-rolling, but had no direct authority over MATs. Ofsted's new inspection framework, had a focus on inclusion and attendance and would help drive improvements with MAT's.

**Actions:**

1. Officers to continue proactive engagement with MATs and schools to address patterns of de-registration;
2. Officers to maintain and expand community-based opportunities for EHE families to support socialisation;
3. Monitor national reforms and update the Committee on implications for local practice.

**Recommendations:**

The Panel agreed to:

1. Note the key challenges and current work programmes outlined in the report;
2. Endorse the priorities identified for reducing unnecessary EHE and strengthening oversight.

34. **Action Log**

The Panel agreed to note the action log.

35. **Work Programme**

The Panel added the following to the work programme:

- a) Family First Partnership Programme Update;
- b) SEND Inspection Outcome;
- c) Elective Home Education update.