

Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 6 February 2019

PRESENT:

Councillor Mrs Beer, in the Chair.

Councillor Murphy, Vice Chair.

Councillors Mrs Bridgeman (substitute for Councillor Mrs Johnson), Buchan, Goslin, Michael Leaves (substitute for Councillor R. Smith), Samantha Leaves, Tuohy and Winter.

Apologies for absence: Nicky Williams and Councillors Mrs Johnson and R. Smith.

Also in attendance: Councillor Jon Taylor (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Transformation), Judith Harwood (Service Director for Education, Participation & Skills), David Bowles (Head of Education, Participation & Skills), Jo Siney (Head of Special Education Needs & Disability), Sue McDonald (Cabinet Member for Children & Young People), Neelam Bhardwaja (Service Director for Children, Young People & Families) and Helen Rickman (Democratic Advisor).

The meeting started at 2.00 pm and finished at 4.00 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.

33. **Declarations of Interests**

The following declarations of interest were made by Members in accordance with the code of conduct:

Member	Subject	Reason	Interest
Councillor Sam Leaves	Minute 37	Her daughter has a EHCP and can be absent from school due to her disability.	Private
Councillor Mrs Bridgeman	Minute 37	She is a Governor at Torbridge Primary School	Personal

34. **Minutes**

Agreed the minutes of the 28 November 2018 Education & Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee as an accurate record of the meeting.

35. **Chair's Urgent Business**

There were no items of Chair's Urgent Business.

36. **The Plymouth Challenge**

Councillor Jon Taylor (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Transformation), Judith Harwood (Service Director for Education, Participation & Skills) and David Bowles (Head of Education, Participation & Skills) provided a brief overview of The Plymouth Challenge.

The following key points were highlighted to Members:

- (a) the aspiration strand was one of three strands in The Plymouth Challenge and this was the main strand the Council was responsible for moving forward. The steering group had been set up with membership from officers of the council, head teachers and careers specialists;
- (b) the work plan had been drafted and focused on 4 key areas including improving careers education, independent advice and guidance, increasing opportunities for employers to support young people, developing support for vulnerable young people and developing approaches to communications to present positive stories for education and well as the challenges;
- (c) the STEM agenda had a set of ambitious targets; whilst the work for this sat under the STEM plan it was recognised that progress should not be made in isolation as the work heavily linked to the aspiration agenda;
- (d) as part of the work programme, officers had been trying to link work together to be most effective with resources; the STEM work programme had been linked to lots of fun activities, linked to schools which were universal, funded or linked to specific schools.

In response to questions raised it was reported that –

- (e) the steering group had met once and agreed their terms of reference and four broad areas of work as part of a detailed work plan;
- (f) Gatsby benchmarking was a specific set of criteria of a careers service that schools and the Local Authority should be working towards; the full list of Gatsby benchmarking criteria would be provided to Members;
- (g) secondary school head teachers were responsible for the leadership of the other strands of The Plymouth Challenge;
- (h) officers were working with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and were linked in to the regional project led by the Teaching School Council and Regional School's Commissioner in order to help raise aspirations of disadvantaged pupils;
- (i) children that received home education were checked by the local authority to ensure they were receiving an appropriate education and that they were safeguarded; the local authority didn't provide materials or information about initiatives to elective home educated pupils as they were, by law, outside of the

mainstream system;

- (j) private schools were not asked to participate in The Plymouth Challenge; the Local Authority had a role to provide advice if contacted by a private school but did not actively engage;
- (k) the University of Plymouth was already involved in raising aspirations as part of The Plymouth Challenge.

Agreed that –

- 1. the Gatsby benchmarking criteria would be provided to Members;
- 2. the Plymouth Challenge would be included on the work programme to be discussed at a future meeting.

37. **School Attendance**

Councillor Jon Taylor (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Transformation), Judith Harwood (Service Director for Education, Participation and Skills), David Bowles (Education, Participation & Skills) and Jo Siney (Head of Special Education Needs & Disability) presented the School Attendance item.

The key points highlighted to Members included:

- (a) there was an overall trend in the increase of absence in schools across Plymouth; this data was monitored closely and was one of the top priorities to ensure that all school aged children received a suitable education;
- (b) illness accounted for the highest reason for absence in school and it was considered that this included anxiety and mental health issues;
- (c) a steering group was due to be set up to focus on a number of areas highlighted in the report including monitoring children offsite, a review of section 19 medical needs and exploring evidence based interventions to support school attendance.

In response to questions raised it was reported that –

- (d) young people that were absent from school due to reasons linked with their special educational needs or disability were monitored in the same way as any other school absence; the local authority worked with schools and families to assess and monitor reasons for absence and make allowances where necessary;
- (e) it was considered that there was a prevalence of anxiety and mental health conditions which were impacting levels of school absence;
- (f) the levels of absence in service children was not monitored specifically;
- (g) research suggested that 17 days absence at secondary school level would

impact one grade at GCSE level; when persistent absence was due to illness, the local authority would work with parents/ carers to assess if further support could be provided within the home setting;

- (h) officers that worked within both the attendance team and the SEND team were now aligned as one team with the aim to improve interventions;
- (i) schools were responsible for monitoring their own levels of bullying however the local authority was committed to ensure bullying didn't occur and would become involved in instances of casework and would work with both the school and family. It was acknowledged that some children may pretend to be ill because they didn't want to attend school because of bullying however this was very difficult for authorities to monitor as real reasons for absence could be hidden and academies were not obliged to pass this data onto the local authority;
- (j) figures relating to the numbers of pupils managing long term health conditions/ chronic conditions were increasing and this was having an effect on absence; the benchmark for persistence absence was set at 90% therefore a pupil only needed to have half a day off a week regularly to be categorised as a persistent absentee;
- (k) the local authority did not monitor the levels of absenteeism specifically related to pupils that did not live near to their closest school or nearby to their allocated school;
- (l) officers did not monitor how many young people did not attend school on exam days due to bullying; this was not highlighted to the local authority as a significant issue and data was not received for this;
- (m) the local authority monitored data on young carers; this was something that was provided to the Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of their work programme;
- (n) a number of schools throughout the city had changed their term dates to include an additional week of holiday in October 2019.

The Chair thanked officers and the Cabinet Member for their attendance and agreed the following:

1. to recommend that the local authority considers going out to consultation to amend school dates to include an additional week of holiday onto the October and May holidays, therefore reducing the summer break by two weeks;
2. to recommend that the council considers including a note at the bottom of letters sent out as a result of absenteeism, asking parents/ carers to consider if their child's absence was due to bullying and to signpost to support available;
3. for officers to investigate the feasibility of adding targeted signposting for bullying support on the council's social media platforms;

3. for officers to contact Plymouth academies and request data on absenteeism, specifically due to bullying;
4. for officers to provide data to Members regarding absenteeism as a result of a child attending a school which isn't their closest or is a distance away from home;
5. that the Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee offer an invitation to a Head teacher from both an academy and local authority school to discuss how they deal with bullying;
6. for officers to provide data to Members specifically regarding absenteeism linked to child carers and service children;
7. for officers to provide Members with data linked to persistent absenteeism, specifically due to mental health issues as well as waiting times for referrals to the CAMHS.

38. **High Cost Placements**

Sue McDonald (Cabinet Member for Children & Young People) and Neelam Bhardwaja (Service Director for Children, Young People & Families) presented the High Cost Placements report.

Key points highlighted to Members included:

- (a) the fact that all Councillors were corporate parents;
- (b) there were 413 children in care in Plymouth, with a further 265 children, considered 'children in need' in the community with a care plan; the scale of need coming forward was unprecedented and this was recognised nationally;
- (c) the council had a variety of pledges linked to this area, including the aim to reduce institutional placements, to promote fostering and adoption, and to try to help care leavers find apprenticeships within the Council; a decision was made by Council to also exempt care leavers from paying council tax;
- (d) it was considered that the main cause for the council having an overspent budget was due to the high cost of children's placements; approximately 88% of local authorities, 133 out of 152, were overspending on children's social care;
- (e) on 19 January 2019 the Auditor General commissioned a report into the state of children's social care services – this was commissioned by the Department for Education. Work was due to be completed in the Summer of 2019 however it was considered that the Department for Education lacked a clear pathway to achieve its goals;
- (f) the majority of children looked after by the council were supported by in-

house or independent fostering agencies; 413 children were in council care, with only 57 children making the high cost placements;

- (g) of the high cost placements, 35 young people were in residential placements and this included children with a disability; 3 young people were in secure accommodation and this was because they were either a risk to themselves or to others; and 19 young people were in supported living arrangements because they may be difficult to place for a variety of reasons or because a placement had failed;
- (h) the local authority's budget for children's social care was £8, 284,000 however the spend was currently £12,237,000.

In response to questions raised it was reported that –

- (i) young people were sometimes placed out of Plymouth for their own wellbeing and safeguarding or because specialist provision was not available in the city; the aim was for children to be placed at in-house provision, or independent fostering sector;
- (j) Members would be provided with specific figures, for this financial year, regarding the numbers of specialist residential placements that were required;
- (k) the council had access to different funds and grants, including the Disabled Facilities Grant, to help support children with disabilities and who required specialist provision; it was highlighted that some families may not want specialist provision at home for a multitude of reasons therefore children were required to be placed out of their home setting;
- (l) the weekly rate for children's social care was radically different from the budgeted amount and this was due to the complexity of care required, the increase in the cost of care and the demand on the budget;
- (m) complexities of cases had increased and lots of cases were linked to mental health issues and substance abuse; the council was trying to develop its early help offer to stop them escalating.
- (n) officers worked well with health colleagues within the current policies in place however policies were now being looked at with a focus on financial contributions.

Under this item the Chair highlighted that the cost of placements had increased by approximately 13% and this was having a huge impact on the Council's budget.

Members noted the update and thanks Neelam and Councillor McDonald for their attendance.

39. **Work Programme**

Members agreed to –

- I. include the School Readiness Review to their work programme to receive a

progress update at a future meeting;

2. noted the work programme.

40. **Tracking Resolutions**

Members noted the tracking resolutions document.

Under this item Councillors Buchan and Tuohy raised their thanks to officers for Gateway and Hub visit.