

## Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 17 November 2021

### PRESENT:

Councillor Laing, in the Chair.  
Councillor James, Vice Chair.  
Councillors Allen, Bingley, Cresswell, Goslin, Loveridge, Partridge and Vincent.

Also in attendance: Alison Botham(Director of Children's Services), Jean Kelly(Service Director for Children, Young People and Families), Ming Zhang (Service Director for Education, Participation and Skills & Jake Metcalfe (Democratic Support Advisor)

The meeting started at 1.30 pm and finished at 5.15 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. **Declarations of Interest**

Name	Item Number	Interest
Councillor Allen	11 – Young Carers	Personal Interest

#### 65. **Minutes**

The minutes of 8 September 2021 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

Councillor Cresswell had queried an action from page 5 of the minutes as to whether additional funding had been provided for Speech and Language services in Plymouth.

Ming Zhang, Service Director for Education, Participation and Skills advised that the Department for Education would make an announcement in the first three months of 2022.

The place based programme had been going well and a Board had been formally setup which was chaired by the Department for Educations Regional Commissioner with a Plymouth City Council officer as a stakeholder.

The Department for Education had injected £400,000 into training. A further priority in leadership would be rolled out on 1 December 2021, with a conference which would invite all school leaders in the region including Multi Academy Trusts, Maintained schools and Free schools to attend.

An evidence based approach had been developed closely with the Department for Education which produced a management information KPI to gauge the internal place based programme that was being finalised, All schools in Plymouth had signed up to send information for analysis. A final data sharing protocol would be finalised.

66. **Chair's Urgent Business**

Councillor Jemima Laing advised the Committee that a response had been returned from the Department for Work and Pensions regarding the Kickstart programme. The letter thanked the Committee for supporting the scheme in Plymouth and further advised that an improved application and assessment process has been completed.

Further discussion would take place on 16 February 2022 to discuss the Kickstart programme to ascertain whether the improved application and assessment process had translated to more young people have the opportunity to take part in the programme,

67. **Policy Brief**

Caroline Marr, Senior Policy Advisor provided the Committee with updates on:

- a) Consultations had been announced and Plymouth City Council would be responding to the consultation by 24 January 2022 regarding children's homes.
- b) *£24 million for regional recovery in tackling harms for vulnerable children* – Jean Kelly, Service Director for Children, Young People and Families had been chasing this but had not yet received a response.
- c) *£48 million investment for Adoption* – The South West Regional Adoption Agency would be accessing funding. Caroline Marr advised the Committee that all funding had been allocated. Jean Kelly further advised the committee a small amount of money had been allocated to each of the regional adoption agencies, the funding would be used to recruit and support adopters.
- d) 11 November 2021 – A press release from OFSTED highlighted a lack of foster carers in the system and a continued lack of capacity in the foster care sector. This had led to vulnerable children missing out on the care and support they required. Nationally foster carer numbers had increased by 4% since 2014, however the number of children requiring foster care had increased by 11% in the same period. It was also highlighted that the range of foster carers available had not always been meeting the needs of the children due to their increasing complex needs.
- e) 15 November 2021 – The Education Secretary gave an opening speech in the House of Commons for the second reading of the Post 16 and Education Bill, this had passed and was at the committee stage where a detailed examination of the Bill would be undertaken;

- f) 16 November 2021 – The Department for Education had provided a press release regarding anti-bullying. It stated that further support for schools in England would be given to combat bullying, with £1 million funding provided to five leading organisations to support schools and colleges. It was recognised that the press release did not advise how the funding would be disseminated.
- g) 17 November 2021 – A research publication had been released which provided insight as to schools views in relation to the benefits and obstacles of joining an academy trust.

Members discussed:

- a) Plymouth City Council were at an advanced stage in developing a local family hubs offer. The bidding process had been under way and the awarding of the contracts were in process. The additional fund allowed the Council to bid for up to £830,000 to support the transformation of the family hubs initiative. The bid was due to be submitted for 17 December 2021. It was expected that the Council would have the results of the bid by Spring 2022.
- b) *Care leavers and disadvantaged pupils to benefit from £126 million investment in new laptops and tablets.*

Support for training children and young people would be a part of the funding provided. It was recognised that young people would have a skills gap with the use of software on the hardware provided. For Children in Care, Ming Zhang would be able to bring information forward from the Virtual School team which would advise the committee how these children and young people are being supported.

## 68. **Finance Monitoring**

David Northey, Head of Integrated Finance presented this item to members. Members were advised that for Children's Social Care, business as usual had been coming in on budget with additional COVID spend holding at £7.914 million.

Members were advised that a budget preparatory session in relation to the directorates would be held in December.

Members discussed:

- a) Grant funding would cover the additional pressure from COVID-19 which had resulted in the budget for the directorate being nil. It was recognised that the grant funding from government may not continue.
- b) There had been and continued to be additional pressures in relation to the number of children coming into care and their complexity of needs requiring suitable placements, this included a greater use of residential

placements. Since March 2020 there had been an increase of 16-17% of children in care and the pressures of securing suitable placements for children remained challenging.

- c) Plymouth City Council's modelling of future budget requirements and how the modelling used national figures to translate to a local level for Plymouth. The modelling took into account historical trends and predictions. It was recognised that it would be difficult to forecast for the directorates budget in relation to what impact the cessation of the £20 universal credit uplift would have on families;
- d) Upon the release of new national data this would then be factored into the modelling undertaken by Plymouth City Council for its budget.
- e) The Children, Young People and Families service had been supporting families at earlier points of intervention in order to prevent further escalation of need. Further discussions around the modelling would be brought to the budget preparatory session in December 2021.
- f) Councillors were concerned that the COVID Grants provided by government on a temporary basis would be masking pressures on the budget.

69. **COVID Update - Verbal Update** (Verbal Report)

Jean Kelly, Service Director for Children, Young People and Families provided an update for members and highlighted the following key points:

- a) The Children, Young People and Families service continued to work with clear safe systems of work practices and staff were working from home where possible. Midland House was open to professionals and families and the service as a whole had low levels of infection and no one contracted COVID-19 through work.
- b) There had been 504 children in care from data ending 31 October 2021. For data 17 November 2021 this had reduced by 7 to 497 children.
- c) The number of children and young people in residential placements were high, this was due to issues in relation to placement sufficiency locally, regionally and nationally.

Ming Zhang, Service Director for Education, Participation and Skills provided an update to members and highlighted the following key points:

- a) COVID-19 infection rates within schools in Plymouth had been higher than the national average but low when compared regionally. Plymouth City Council's Public Health service and the service for Education, worked closely together and met every Monday to share

information and to decide the best advice to send out to schools in Plymouth. Advice had been given to parents that they needed to exercise more caution and to encourage staff and pupils to wear face coverings where required.

- b) It was recognised that despite the extreme difficulty in managing a higher infection rate there hadn't been a whole school closure.
- c) Staff illness had been a risk factor for schools in Plymouth from COVID-19. A shortage of supply teachers was a national issue. It was welcomed to hear schools in Plymouth had been supporting one another in times of difficulty.
- d) CO2 monitors continued to be delivered to all schools in Plymouth and Health and Safety colleagues continued to contact schools in Plymouth to ensure all schools had received the devices
- e) Future COVID updates would have a submitted written report for the committee.

#### 70. **Elective Home Education**

Councillor Downie, Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Children and Young People introduced the report on Elective Home Education and advised the committee that he was pleased that the Inclusion Strategy Board had been moving to a preventative model which would seek to prevent and reduce the number of inappropriate elective home education undertakings.

Ming Zhang, Service Director for Education, Participation and Skills highlighted the following key points.

- a) During the pandemic, there had been a significant increase in parents electing to home educate their children. Plymouth, although had been a part of the increased trend, had not seen rates as high as the national average.
- b) 375 pupils had been officially registered as home educated at the end of the previous academic year. Previous to that, 369 pupils had been registered as home educated with pre-pandemic levels at 342 pupils.
- c) Plymouth had a high number of vulnerable children that were home educated and known to Plymouth City Council's Children's Social Care, where there had been either Child in Need or Child Protection concerns.
- d) 65% of those Children and young people had an EHCP. The Council planned to move to an earlier intervention model that would enable an earlier professional view as to whether the elective home education request was appropriate.

Members discussed:

- a) A further report would be submitted from Ming Zhang on analysis of the decision making of schools as to why pupils became home educated and why the proportion was higher in a small number of schools.
- b) Home educated students were not required to follow national curriculum as stated by the government's guidance. Whether an arrangement had been suitable or not would be based on a qualified teachers professional judgement.
- c) There had been no clear evidence to suggest schools were encouraging students to become home educated. Ming Zhang would look into the concerns raised by members of the committee and present findings at another committee date.
- d) Ming Zhang would also include in the analysis of the data, reasons as to why a high proportion of young people electively home educated were in the Year 11 cohort, this had concerned councillors due to the GCSE period.
- e) Councillors further requested information on whether those home educated young people were being linked in with the Kickstart programme or other alternative apprenticeship schemes.

71. **Inclusion Strategy Board**

Ming Zhang, Service Director for Education, Skills and Participation introduced the report to the committee.

Members discussed:

- a) A scorecard had been worked on and would be available in one month. This would aid democratic scrutiny in the future.
- b) Secondment opportunities continued to see an uptake from staff which represented good buy-in in relation to the strategic direction.
- c) As a city permanent exclusions in primary schools continued. A nurture provision had been created by Discovery Trust, specifically at the Edison Centre. An injection of investment into this would see the offer open up to all schools in the city at a reduced cost. The aim of the initiative had been to reduce exclusions and return children back to their original settings at an earlier point of intervention.

72. **REACH Academy - Verbal Report** (Verbal Report)

Dean Ashton, Chief Executive for REACH South Academy Trust presented this report to the committee and highlighted the following key points:

- a) REACH was a multi academy trust that had been founded in 2016. Plymouth had become the heart of REACH South and since then the Trust had set up 14 academies with 10 in Plymouth. Of those 10 academies, 8 were Primary schools, 7 in Devonport and the other being Goosewell Primary Academy. The Trust also operated UTC Plymouth and Millbay Academy.
- b) There were 12 trustees on the board, all of whom had been successful in their own worlds and came from a range of backgrounds.
- c) It had not been uncommon to create a collaboration between two schools. Millbay Academy and High Street primary school had collaborated to increase capacity and improve the quality of leadership.
- d) Millbay Academy and High Street Primary school had been geographically close. Millbay joined the trust due to OFSTED ruling that the school had been in unusually deep special measures for quality of education and various other qualities that would be expected of a school. The school had been on a transformational journey which had included the integration of a high quality leadership team who had significant experience in turning schools around. The Trust had also implemented a different form of Governance which focussed on school improvement.
- e) Millbay Academy pupil numbers had dropped since joining the trust due to parents electing to send their children to an alternative school due to the poor Ofsted reviews from 2019. Parents had also exercised their right to take their children elsewhere due to disagreement with the Ofsted findings and subsequent decision to join the trust.
- f) High Street Primary Academy's pupil numbers remained stable at 119 including nursery, however the school had been recognised as being half full with full capacity being 210, and this created capacity issues at the school.
- g) The Trust therefore brought the two schools together in order to embed a high quality leadership team and a governance structure focussed on school improvement. This decision had also been implemented to rationalise costs of management and the back office, this would focus resourcing of high quality teaching in the primary phase.
- h) The Trust had been working with Government on a significant capital investment into Millbay Academy which equated to £4-6

million. It was determined by the trust that although the building looked nice aesthetically from the outside, it did not operate how a school should with the open plan nature of the building not providing an area for focussed and effective learning. The long term vision would be to merge both schools together.

Members discussed:

- a) The consultation process between parents and the community as a whole to move students from High Street Primary Academy to Millbay Academy and vice versa.
- b) It was clarified that the leadership team consulted with parents around the plans for both schools. It was recognised that not all parents had been satisfied with the decisions, but the Trust had done their best to consult parents where they could. The Trust continued to evaluate whether the new arrangements were working.
- c) It was confirmed that there were no parents on the intervention board, however the intervention board would be time limited with the task of turning the school around from a deep special measure school into a school that would be fit for purpose. When those time limits had been reached, the board would then revert to a normal governing body where two parents would be elected. The timescale for Millbay and High street would be to achieve that by September 2022. Parental election would take place in summer 2022. The Trust Board would take a decision in Easter 2022 as to whether the school should return to a local governing body.
- d) The Curriculum at Millbay Academy had been unlawful, the law required that there would be a broad and balanced curriculum including Maths, English and Science; Millbay Academy made Science optional which had resulted in a dysfunctional curriculum. Since the Trusts involvement this has been resolved however many parents were unhappy with the decision to reinstate Science as a mandatory subject and believed that this had gone against the creative ethos of the school.
- e) The behaviour policy had been broken at the school which had resulted in attendance of pupils at school being very poor. The environment for the children and young people had been anarchic with physical capacity issues which had led to children feeling unsafe. Leaders at the school re-established discipline policies and created a consistent and safe environment for every child, attendance rates had subsequently risen. Staff attendance rates had also been low as the environment was not a fun or safe place to work.
- f) An update was provided on the estates on both schools; High Street Primary Academy continued to provide an early years setting; Millbay also had green field access which Millbay completely lacked.

- g) The trust had no intention to dispose of the High Street site and if this changed in the future would need Secretary of State approval who would seek recommendations from Plymouth City Council. Dean Ashton clarified that the trust had no plans or intentions to dispose of the High Street site and this has been assessed as a huge asset to the trust.
- h) It was advised that the use of different school uniforms within one setting would cause segregation issues between children and young people.
- i) The Committee thanked Dean Ashton for his attendance at the committee.

73. **Young Carers**

Ming Zhang, Service Director for Education, Participation and Skills presented this item to members and highlighted the following key points:

- a) It was acknowledged that it had been important to identify young carer children at the earliest point. This would be key to unlock support that would be available to them and understand their situation in order to try and improve their circumstances;
- b) Plymouth City Council had a very good record of meeting a wide range of diverse needs of its young carers in order to support them.

Members discussed:

- a) Councillor Laing thanked, on behalf of the committee, the young carers in the city who had been shouldering the burden which was recognised as being significant.
- b) Ming Zhang would investigate as to what arrangements were in place for young carers to have respite and report back to the Committee. Young carers had been offered a wide range of support which included giving advice and signposting to the correct agency.
- c) Support had been provided in school for Young carers to support them in their education to try and ensure that they would not fall behind with their studies. Ming advised the committee that schools were committed and flexible in providing support within schools for young carers.
- d) Young Carers assessment and transition assessments would be completed by schools and some agencies, all schools had access to the relevant portal.

- e) It was requested that support for young carers in going away on a retreat for a week should be sought to provide respite to young carers.

74. **Innovate**

Jean Kelly, Service Director for Children, Young People and Families presented the report to members and highlighted the following key points:

- a) The contracted Innovate team had continued to provide a social work service to children in the Local Authority that had been subject to Child Protection Plans and were in care proceedings.
- b) The service had experienced challenges in recruiting experienced social work staff to the Children Social Work service. It was recognised that there had been a 25% extra demand in the service for both referrals coming through the referral assessment service as well as children remaining within the service for longer due to the delay in care proceedings or a limited range of community interventions or responses available during difficult periods throughout the pandemic.
- c) The leadership team decided to use a managed team due to usual recruitment efforts not yielding the social work resource required at that time.
- d) Social Work capacity had increased twice in the last year. In October 2020 an additional 8.5 social workers were made permanent. During the summer of 2020 demand for the service had not receded.
- e) The COVID Outbreak management fund had allowed the service to fund the Innovate team and they had been with the Council since August 2020.
- f) The team had a positive impact on morale and caseloads for current staff. It was recognised that plans needed to be in place in preparation for the team exiting the service.
- g) The Children's social work service had seen a 7% vacancy rate which was identified as being lower than many other local authorities.
- h) Work had been on-going with Pertemps to ascertain whether they could provide the number of social workers required to fill vacancies within the teams;
- i) Management had reviewed all caseloads within the service to ensure that families had been receiving the correct level of support. This review had been successful and many families had

been stepped down to universal services or alternatively, other targeted support services.

Members discussed:

- a) Innovate had been offering their teams dedicated business support, quality assurance officers, head of service and a team manager. The team were also being paid a higher hourly rate than what had been offered by Plymouth City Council. It was also recognised that some social workers liked to work temporary roles rather than more permanent.
- b) There had not been a gap in capacity for managing Child Protection plans and the service did have experienced social workers in the service. With the exit of the Innovate team planned and the continued increase in service demand, it was planned by the service to recruit to the posts left by the Innovate team.
- c) The Vacancy rate in Plymouth's Children Social Work service continued to be low and was lower than many other local authorities. The service increased its permanent capacity in the service by 8.5 social workers. The service's vacancy rate had continued to be lower than the national average for children's social worker posts.
- d) Councillor Downie advised that he met with Jean Kelly weekly and Cabinet is aware through himself, of the pressures the service had faced.

75. **Work Programme**

Members discussed the work programme and actioned the following:

To add:

- Inclusion Board Scorecard
- Further update on elective home education
- Information to be included in respect of modelling for the budget session scheduled in December 2021
- Recruitment and retention of staff update
- Afghan Resettlement Programme
- School attainment to be a future item in October or November 2022.

To remove:

- Everyone's invited review
- Care Leavers offer; updates would be provided through the Corporate Parenting Group