

Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 4 March 2020

PRESENT:

Councillor Mrs Johnson, in the Chair.

Councillor McDonald, Vice Chair.

Councillors Allen, Buchan, Corvid, Goslin, James and Loveridge.

Apologies for absence: Councillors Murphy (Councillor Corvid substituting) and Downie.

Also in attendance: Alison Botham (Strategic Director of Children's Services), Jean Kelly (Service Director for Children, Young People and Families), Councillor Laing (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People), Helen Rickman (Democratic Advisor), Paul Stephens (Performance Advisor), Councillor Jon Taylor (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Transformation).

The meeting started at 2.00 pm and finished at 4.20 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.

53. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest in accordance with the code of conduct.

54. Appointment of Vice Chair

In the absence of Councillor Murphy, Councillor McDonald was appointed as Vice Chair for this meeting.

55. Minutes

Members agreed the minutes of 8 January 2020 as an accurate record of the meeting.

56. Chair's Urgent Business

Under this item Alison Botham (Director of Children's Services) provided Members with a brief update regarding Coronavirus (Covid 19) and the impact on schools.

Members were advised that Dr Ruth Harrell (Director of Public Health) was the Council's lead regarding Covid 19; arrangements had been reviewed and revised on a regular basis and updates from the DFE were provided to schools. There were currently no confirmed cases in Plymouth schools and a decision regarding any form

of school closure would be between the school and Public Health England. It was expected that incidents of self-isolation would be recorded as authorised absence.

In response to Members questions it was highlighted that:

- (a) it was not expected that schools were asking parents to confirm if a child's self-isolation was directed by a GP or through parental choice;
- (b) business continuity arrangements, specifically regarding children's social care, were in place and would be revised if necessary to support the needs of children;
- (c) officers were not aware of a newly confirmed case of Covid 19 in Devonport however information surrounding this virus would be the priority of Dr Ruth Harrell.

Members noted the update.

57. **Mapping of Corporate Plan to Scrutiny Committees**

Under this item clarification was sought as to which scrutiny panel was responsible for CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) as this was not specifically listed in the mapping of the Corporate Plan to Scrutiny Committees document.

It was agreed that clarification would be sought from the Scrutiny Management Board as to which scrutiny panel was responsible for CAMHS.

58. **Policy Update**

Committee Members discussed the Policy Update specifically with regards to the Department for Education's, 'Music Education: Call for Evidence'.

Members raised their concerns regarding the impact on a student's later life if music was not prioritised by schools and considered that there was less emphasis on music and creative education.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- (a) officers were due to respond to the 'Unregulated Provision for Children in Care and Care Leavers' Department for Education Open Consultation;
- (b) Members would be advised if officers were intending on responding to the 'Music Education: Call for Evidence' open consultation and if so, what the response would include. Members highlighted that, as a scrutiny panel, they could respond to consultations however timescales were restrictive in this instance.

Members noted the update.

59. **Number of Children in Care - verbal update**

Jean Kelly (Service Director for Children, Young People and Families) provided Members with an update on the number of children in care.

The following key points were highlighted to Members:

- (a) the local authority currently had 1684 children in need; this was calculated at 320 children per 10,000 and was within England averages and statistical neighbour averages. There were 965 (55 per 10,000) children who had a child in need plan with 431 of those children in the care of the local authority (82 per 10,000). 288 children were subject to child protection plans (55 per 10,000);
- (b) in response to a query raised at the previous meeting, there were 80 children in care who lived more than 10 miles from the local authority – the distance was calculated from the child's family home and not the city border;
- (c) in response to a query raised at the previous meeting, of the 431 children in the care of the local authority, 406 were white British and 25 were from a range of ethnicities (black or mixed race);

In response to questions raised it was reported that –

- (d) there were several performance indicators linked to children in care including health assessments, dental checks, plans and assessments, care leavers, suitable accommodation and education, employment and training. It was agreed that an update on performance indicators for children in care would be added to the panel's work programme in order to allow Members to track progress;
- (e) the 431 children in care was calculated as 82 per 10,000 and was below the average which was 90 per 10,000; statistical neighbours included Torbay, Southampton, Sheffield, Portsmouth, Rotherham, Bournemouth and Medway. The range was from below 82 to 120;
- (f) information related to looked after children was provided on an annual basis as part of the SSDA 903 return; as at March 2019 Plymouth was reported at 78 children per 10,000, with statutory neighbours having an average of 94.44 children per 10,000 and England at 65 per 10,000.

Members noted the update.

60. **Pledges Update - to follow**

Councillor Laing (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People) provided a brief overview of the Pledges Update report and drew Members attention to the Barnardos Care Journey work – it was highlighted that this was an exciting programme which was designed to ensure that care leavers would end up in a positive destination.

The Chair commented that the inclusion of completion dates to the pledges document would help Members effectively scrutinise and track progress.

In response to questions raised it was reported that –

- (a) in relation to Pledge 41, the Council did not currently have enough foster carers – the campaign was designed to attract new foster carers to the local authority. The Council was now a Foster Friendly Employer to help employees who already fostered, and to attract employees who wanted to foster in the future;
- (b) the Council currently had 125 foster carers and the aim was to attract 21 new foster carers in the next financial year, and 36 in each of the following two years. This was an ambitious target however it was hoped that the redesign of the foster service in the council and the appointment of a new Service Manager would drive forward this plan;
- (c) with regards to Pledge 40, the Regional Head of Ofsted praised Plymouth for the work already undertaken and it was considered that progress was being made. The Plymouth Education Board was now more established and the Standards Partnership, the operational arm of the Education Board, was meeting.

It was agreed that:

1. Pledge 41 would be added to the panel's work programme in the next municipal year in order to track progress of the number of foster carers recruited to the local authority;
2. Pledge 40 would be added to the panel's work programme in the next municipal year to receive an update on the success of the Standards Partnership.

Members noted the update.

61. **JTAI (Joint Targeted Area Inspection) - verbal update**

Jean Kelly (Service Director for Children, Young People and Families) provided Members with an update on the Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI).

Key points highlighted to Members included the following:

- (a) the JTAI took place 18 - 22 November 2019; the purpose of the inspection was for Ofsted, the CQC, the Police Inspectorate, Fire and Rescue Services and the Probation Service to work in partnership to carry out a joint inspection of the multi-agency response to children's mental health services (between the ages 10-15);
- (b) six local authorities across the country were assessed; a letter summarising

the findings had been received (and was included in the agenda pack) however judgements were not provided in the letter;

- (c) some key strengths identified included: that senior leadership across the partnership was stable, joint commissioning reflected the well-developed partnership arrangements, school based interventions met children's needs at the earliest opportunity;
- (d) areas for improvement included: governance arrangements for the youth offending team required attention, the Safeguarding Children's Partnership Strategic Board needed to improve quality assurance and learning and development sub groups, the local authority quality assurance framework was not robust enough, the youth offending team didn't always use the correct template for assessments and didn't consistently provide analysis of the impact of mental health on a child's experience.

In response to questions raised it was reported that –

- (e) every social worker had regular supervision; time set aside for record keeping was reserved and reviewed, as well as the quality of what was written; cases were audited to quality assure written accounts;
- (f) MASH was the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (a team of partner agencies); it was acknowledged that there was a lack of health and education decision-makers in this group meaning that some decisions lacked input from all agencies however this would be addressed;
- (g) a joint improvement plan would be submitted and agreed by partners in order to address areas of development set out in the letter;
- (h) there were instances whereby some children were placed in bed and breakfast establishments, hotels or other unregulated placements however this was due to an emergency placement breaking down or if a child came into care into an emergency; work to improve the fostering service and increase provision of residential care in Plymouth was hoped to improve this;
- (i) the improvement plan would be made available for scrutiny Members once it had been agreed and signed off by all partners; timescales had yet to be agreed;
- (j) a sub-regional approach for the governance of the youth offending team had been chosen however Devon were leaving this model; a new model had been proposed and agreed in partnership with the Youth Justice Board however it was being considered if youth offending needed to return to a local authority owned arrangement;
- (k) an update regarding Child Sexual Exploitation would be scheduled onto the committee's work programme, specifically with regards to the CSE screening tool to provide Members with assurance that improvements were being made;

- (l) fortnightly meetings were scheduled to discuss gang related activity; officers were confident that safeguards were in place to protect vulnerable children.

The Chair thanked all teams involved in the JTAI.

Agreed that the JTAI Improvement Plan would be provided to the Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee so progress could be charted against the plan.

62. **Scrutiny of Adopt South West: Regional Adoption Agency - verbal update**

Alison Gwilliam (Operations Manager for Adopt South West) provided Members with an update on the Scrutiny of Adopt South West: Regional Adoption Agency.

Key points highlighted to Members included:

- (a) Adopt South West went live on 1st October 2018 and it managed the adoption services for children and adopted adults from the Local Authorities of Devon County Council, Plymouth City Council, Somerset County Council and Torbay Council. Devon County Council was the host Local Authority;
- (b) the Government announced that they were increasing the adoption support fund from £40m last year to £45m this year. There would also be an extra £1m to be spent on recruiting adopters for the most vulnerable children;
- (c) Adopt South West teams had been working hard to boost the number of applicants and held a campaign on social media to 'myth bust' the reasons people often think they can't adopt;
- (d) timescales showed an improvement in Plymouth. Once a child had a court order, they could be placed for adoption; it took on average 181 days for them to be placed. This was an improvement on the previous year's figures of 207 days. The England average rate was 201 days and the national target rate was 121 days.

In response to questions raised it was reported that –

- (e) a copy of the verbal update in written form would be provided to Members; it was highlighted that the author of the update was on holiday therefore adding to the delay in providing the information to Members;
- (f) financial situations were not considered when assessing for future adopters; means tested assessments were undertaken;
- (g) older children and those with complex needs or siblings were most in need of adoption across the country; the recent recruitment campaign targeted the adoption of siblings groups;
- (h) eight years old was considered to be the cut-off point for children to be

adopted; it was unlikely that children older than this age-group would be adopted; children older than this would remain in foster care;

- (i) anyone could adopt a child (as long as they had not committed an offence against a child); age, marital status, gender and sexual orientation would not prevent someone from being a suitable adopter; every adoption would come with an adoption support plan to ensure the specific needs of the child were met;
- (j) there had been an increase in adopter approval from 55 to 75 per month however it was not yet tracked the ratio of enquiry to successful application.

Members noted the update.

(Councillor Corvid declared a personal interest under this item)

63. **Capital and Revenue Monitoring Report Q3**

David Northey (Head of Integrated Finance) introduced the Capital and Revenue Monitoring Report Q3; it was highlighted that pages 51 and 52 of the agenda pack were relevant to the Education and Children's Social Care scrutiny panel.

In response to questions raised it was reported that –

- (a) approximately £5m from Government for Children's Services had been accounted for as growth in the 2020/21 budget – funds wouldn't arrive until April;
- (b) several actions were being taken in Children's Services to mitigate risk in the budget – fortnightly review meetings were held with the Children's Portfolio Holder as well as the Portfolio Holder for Finance to discuss overspend, realise savings and reduce pressure on the budget;
- (c) the Fostering Service had been re-designed, there was a new approach to recruitment and the commissioning of crisis bed in the city; these were new initiatives which were all expected to have a positive impact on the budget in the next financial year;
- (d) officers would work to include further detail in future monitoring reports such as mitigating actions, their effectiveness and future projections.

Members noted the update.

64. **Work Programme**

Under this item the Chair discussed with Members the challenge of coordinating a busy work programme; this was further exacerbated with the cancellation of the November meeting due to purdah and local elections. She highlighted the importance of this area of scrutiny, the necessity of prioritising work which was to

be carried forward and the benefit of using the first meeting of the municipal year to tackle important issues.

The following items were added to the work programme:

- (a) Performance Indicators for Children in Care
- (b) Pledge 41
- (c) Pledge 40
- (d) Child Sexual Exploitation Update

It was recommended that the Chair of the Education and Children's Social Care scrutiny panel for 2020/21 does a thorough review of work currently listed on the work programme and prioritises accordingly and uses the first meeting of the year to scrutinise important issues.

65. **Tracking Decisions**

Members noted the tracking decisions document.