

Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

Wednesday 8 October 2025

PRESENT:

Councillor Blight, in the Chair.

Councillor Wood, Vice Chair.

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

Also in attendance: Councillor Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Apprenticeships), Councillor Laing (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications), David Haley (Director of Children's Services), Amanda Davis (Service Director for Education, Participation and Skills), Lisa Davies (Interim Service Director for Children, Young People and Families), Isabelle Kolinsky (Head of Education and Virtual School), Lisa McDonald (Head of SEND), Matt Fulton (Lead Accountant), Rob Williams (Director of Education, Tedd Wragg Trust), Hannah Pugliese (NHS Devon), Martine Aquilina (Head of Service), Participation Team, Stuart Hogg (Practice Manager), Paul Stephens (Performance Advisor), Susan London (Performance Advisor) and Jake Metcalfe (Democratic Advisor).

The meeting started at 5.30pm and finished at 8.15pm.

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.

13. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

14. Minutes

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

15. Chair's Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

16. Plymouth Attainment Report

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

- a) While teachers and families had provided significant support, the success was down to the young people for their hard work;

- b) There was a collective journey and expressed deep sense of pride and gratitude for the progress made in Plymouth during the year. The progress was attributed to the commitment and collaboration of school leaders, children, families, and local partners, but most of all to the children and young people;
- c) Tangible changes had been seen in classrooms, communities, and the lives of children and young people across the city with key achievements from 2024/25 including:
 - i. More children achieving a good level of development in early years, with stronger outcomes in literacy and maths.
 - ii. Improved phonics screening results in Year 1, with over half of pupils achieving a higher score.
 - iii. Attainment improvements across all areas at Key Stage 2.
 - iv. Rising Attainment 8 scores at Key Stage 4, with Plymouth expected to be in line with national averages.
 - v. Basic measures projected to be in line with or above national averages, with outcomes for disadvantaged pupils well above national in the “4+” GCSE measures.
 - vi. At Key Stage 5, progress measures in A-level and applied qualifications were expected to be above national averages, indicating aspiration and achievement.
- d) Achievements for children in care were noted with more had gaining the qualifications required to secure post-16 pathways. Additionally, more care leavers were choosing to continue learning beyond the age of 18, demonstrating confidence in their potential;
- e) These outcomes were not just numbers but represented real stories, lives, and futures, reflecting the resilience of children, the dedication of educators, and the strength of the community in Plymouth;
- f) It was acknowledged that while progress was good, there was ambition to achieve even more for children and young people.

Stuart Hogg (Practice Manager) and Members of the Participation Team presented questions at the Panel meeting and following discussions it was reported that:

- g) The Participation Team had worked with young people to critically engage with the attainment report through a series of workshops. These sessions aimed to make the data more accessible and link it to previous youth-led campaigns and feedback from forums such as Youth Parliament and Listening Care Councils;
- h) Amanda Davis (Service Director for Education, Participation and Skills) had agreed to attend individual groups to answer further questions once the final validated data was available;

- i) The attainment report was difficult to read and contained jargon, making it inaccessible to young people. It was suggested that a simplified version be produced, including breakdowns by gender and SEND. Officers agreed that this would benefit not only young people but also parents and carers, and committed to taking this forward;
- j) 'Disadvantage' referred to children eligible for free school meals in the last six years, children in care, and previously looked-after children. The relevant data was not available but would be included in the final validated report;
- k) Progress 8 data was missing due to the lack of baseline data caused by COVID-19 disruptions. It was confirmed that this measure would return in 2026;
- l) The Council had strengthened its oversight and ambition through a new leadership group involving Multi Academy Trust CEOs. An education strategy was being developed to ensure no child was left behind, the strategy aimed to build momentum and ensure all children could succeed;
- m) Councillor Cresswell emphasised the importance of maintaining ambition for all children and avoiding complacency;
- n) There were concerns raised around the low attainment of children in care, with only 8% achieving grade 4 or above in English and Maths GCSEs. The Committee discussed how improvements could be made and whether the top tips from care-experienced young people could help. Officers agreed the tips were excellent and should be shared widely with schools and Multi Academy Trusts. The Virtual School committed to embedding these tips and prioritising improvement in foundational subjects;
- o) The Committee considered how secondary schools were supporting students affected by the cost-of-living crisis, particularly regarding access to equipment, uniform, and online resources. A survey would be conducted across schools to gather data on current support and to also identify gaps. Young people offered to assist in designing the survey and confirmed their attendance at the next Headteachers' Conference to present their campaigns;
- p) A glossary would be appended to future reports to improve accessibility;
- q) Placements outside the city were sometimes necessary due to a lack of available homes in Plymouth or the need to meet individual needs. Lisa Davis (Service Director for Children and Families) added that while the priority was to keep children local, some Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children were placed across the UK, including in London.
- r) Children were placed outside of Devon and Cornwall and a briefing report with granular data on the number and location of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children placed outside the city would be written;

- s) The Council worked closely with Multi Academy Trust CEOs to identify successful strategies and scale them across the city. Councillor Cresswell cited the Plymouth Oracy Project as an example of a successful initiative that had positively impacted phonics outcomes.

Actions:

1. The service would produce a young person-friendly version of the attainment report, including breakdowns by gender and SEND.
2. The service would ensure the top tips from care-experienced young people are promoted and embedded across all schools and MATs.
3. The service would design and conduct a survey of schools to collect information on support provided to students affected by the cost-of-living crisis. Young people would assist in designing the survey and participate in the next Headteachers' Conference to present their campaigns.
4. Officers to append a glossary to future reports to improve accessibility.
5. Future reports would include actual numbers alongside percentages in future reporting, particularly where small cohorts were involved.
6. Officers to provide a briefing note to Committee members with granular data on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children placed outside of Plymouth.

17. **A Belonging Framework for Plymouth and the Place Based Plan**

Councillor Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Apprenticeships and Skills), supported by Rob Williams (Director of Education for a Multi-Academy Trust and Lead for the Plymouth Place Based Plan) presented the report to the Panel and highlighted the following key points:

- a) The Belonging Framework and the Plymouth Place-Based Plan, both aimed to improve school attendance and educational outcomes by fostering a sense of belonging among children and young people. Belonging was central to school improvement and when children felt safe, recognised and valued, they were more likely to attend, engage, and succeed;
- b) The Belonging Framework offered practical strategies across eight areas, including leadership, curriculum, and transitions, to help schools build inclusive cultures tailored to their communities. The Place-Based Plan sought to address the root causes of poor attendance through six evidence-informed priorities and tools such as the predictive risk model and the resilience enablement framework;
- c) Plymouth children's attendance had risen by 0.8% in 2024/25, while national attendance had declined by 0.3%, indicating the effectiveness of the approach. Permanent exclusions had also decreased, and outcomes for disadvantaged learners were improving.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- d) There were concerns that some children were unable to attend their preferred schools. The issue was due to capacity constraints and planned admission numbers, but it was noted that the majority of children did receive their first-choice school;
- e) Attendance, outcomes, exclusions, and elective home education were key metrics to measure success. There was a collaboration with ImpactEd and the Engagement Platform to develop a belonging score based on student surveys. The current framework was a first draft and would evolve to include more groups and case studies;
- f) The predictive risk model used compounding factors (e.g. attendance at Key Stage 1, household deprivation) to predict future persistent absenteeism. The model was being trialled in schools and would be digitised for integration into the school transition portal;
- g) There was a commitment to expand the framework to include systemic barriers like poverty and a cross-agency collaboration was underway to address those issues;
- h) The approach was nuanced and acknowledged the need for flexibility. The school system required teacher consistency, particularly for children with additional needs however there were recruitment challenges in Plymouth;
- i) The framework provided suggestions in relation to cultural and religious representations, not mandates, and that implementation would be at the discretion of individual headteachers in consultation with their communities;
- j) The underperformance of white working-class British pupils was a national issue under investigation by the Department for Education. The causes were complex and multifaceted, and a national commission was expected to report in 2026.
- k) The belonging score was derived from surveys measuring students feelings of being valued and listened to. This would be used alongside hard metrics such as attendance and attainment to assess progress;
- l) The importance of creating a safe and supportive environment for all pupils was affirmed and it was reiterated that implementation would be context-specific. The Panel were reminded of schools' legal duties under the Equalities Act;

Actions:

- Education officers to provide statistics on the percentage of children receiving their first-choice school placement.

The Panel agreed that:

1. That metrics for measuring progress in belonging be included in the framework, along with contextual information on how belonging is defined and assessed.
2. That poverty-related barriers to school attendance be explicitly addressed in the framework.
3. That the Committee receive a future update on the implementation and impact of the Belonging Framework and Place-Based Plan, including examples of best practice from schools.

18. **SEND Local Area Improvement Plan**

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

- a) The Council's had an on-going commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND. SEND had become a top priority for the local authority and the engagement of elected Members and the work of officers were praised;
- b) The report focused on two key areas: improvements to the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) processes and the strategic development of SEND capital projects, sufficiency, and support across the city. There were improvements in statutory compliance, decision-making timeliness, and quality assurance, alongside strengthened communication with families and professionals;
- c) There was a significant decline in complaints from parents and carers which was attributed to quicker responses and improved confidence in the system. The report outlined targeted outreach initiatives aimed at reducing reliance on EHCPs and independent placements;
- d) The capital programme update detailed progress against the multi-year SEND sufficiency strategy, including the creation of new specialist places and planning for future provision. The report referenced the Graduated Applied Approach to Inclusion (GATI), for which Plymouth had been shortlisted and named runner-up in the National Association for Special Educational Needs (NASEN) Awards;
- e) There was a collaborative nature of the improvement work, with Hannah Pugliese (NHS Devon ICB) commending the strength of the partnership between the Council and health providers. It was noted that for every EHCP issued, corresponding health assessments had been delivered in a timely manner, and the alignment of strategic approaches across education and health was praised.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- f) EHCP officers had been redeployed to support tribunal bundle preparation, and delays were minimal. A second tribunal officer had also been appointed to address the gap in the tribunal team;
- g) There was a national and regional shortage of Educational Psychologist (EP's) and mitigations were outlined, including the recruitment of assistant EPs from local psychology students, use of locums, and a business case for additional agency support was being prepared. Strategic efforts were also underway to reduce demand through early intervention and targeted support in mainstream schools.
- h) Data in relation to a BBC report that ranked Plymouth fifth worst nationally in issuing EHCPs within the statutory 20-week timeframe, was accurate but historic, and significant progress had been made, including issuing over 700 plans in the past year. A backlog had been cleared, and the service was now moving towards meeting the 20-week target.
- i) A Recovery plan for annual reviews was in place, with each school being allocated an annual review officer. Reviews were being processed in real time using the most up-to-date information and emergency or urgent reviews were being prioritised;
- j) There were positive outcomes from the initial targeted support pilot in five schools, which included reduced behavioural incidents and strong parental feedback. The programme had since expanded to 30 schools, with ongoing monitoring and peer support in place;
- k) The importance of creativity, partnership, and strategic alignment in overcoming national workforce shortages and improving outcomes for children and families was reinforced;
- l) The Panel raised concerns regarding a capital project for a new special school, which was expected to exceed available funds. A letter would be written to Bridget Phillipson MP and the Department for Education in an attempt to address the concern;
- m) The Panel thanked Lisa McDonald for her work in Plymouth and wished her well for her future role.

Action:

- The letter regarding capital funding for the new special school to be finalised and sent to the Department for Education.

Recommendations:

The Panel agreed:

1. That the progress, key challenges, and priorities for the next quarter be noted.

19. **Children's Services Budget Quarter One Outturn Position**

Matt Fulton (Lead Accountant) introduced the report to the Panel and highlighted the following key points:

- a) The service continued to face financial pressures, particularly due to rising costs in independent specialist and residential placements. Those pressures were exacerbated by limited placement availability both regionally and nationally, resulting in increased demand and higher per-package costs. Similar issues were noted within Plymouth's short break service;
- b) Strategic responses included the Family Homes Programme, an enhanced fostering and recruitment campaign, and strengthened collaboration through the Reconnect Partnership;
- c) Staffing challenges persisted, with reliance on agency and interim staff to maintain continuity. A service redesign was underway to align with the Families First Partnership, aiming to resolve recruitment issues and reduce agency dependency;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- d) Gross agency spend in quarter one was £573,000. The department had reduced its agency staff spend by more than half compared to 2024/25. The target was to reduce agency staff to 11 by year-end, primarily social workers and advanced practitioners, though statutory requirements might necessitate temporary increases;
- e) There was a national cap on agency rates which was introduced on 01 October, with a transition period until March 2026. The agreed regional rates were £38/hour for social workers, £42/hour for team managers, and £45/hour for senior managers. These rates aimed to ensure value for money and consistency across local authorities;
- f) While agency staff were sometimes necessary, performance management processes were in place to ensure quality. Poor performance would result in termination of contracts, though such decisions were balanced against the impact on children and families;
- g) A regional Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was part of a national effort to manage increasing costs. All local authorities in the South West had agreed to the cap, with similar arrangements in other regions;
- h) There was a need to balance the importance of recruitment and retention, noting that increased caseloads for permanent staff could lead to turnover. There had been a significant reduction in the numbers of agency staff following the staffing structure redesign aligned with the Families First Partnership;

- i) A 59% increase in the Children's Services budget over four years, amounting to a £31 million annual rise was consistent nationally. Benchmarking with North Tyneside revealed identical pressures and budget growth.

The Panel agreed to acknowledge the significant reduction in agency staff and the strategic work undertaken to achieve this improvement.

20. **Child Exploitation Annual Report**

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

- a) Child exploitation referred to situations where children and young people were manipulated, coerced or forced into activities for the benefit of others. This included sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation (such as gang involvement or drug trafficking), and other forms of abuse;
- b) Plymouth took child exploitation very seriously and offered a robust safeguarding response, working closely with the child-centred policing team and schools to reduce or mitigate risk;
- c) Between September 2024 and August 2025, there were 905 missing episodes involving 612 children, compared to 1,095 episodes involving 679 children in the previous year. While the reduction appeared small, it was described as very welcome and indicative of progress;

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- d) Missing episodes were a key indicator of vulnerability and often corresponded with exploitation risks, although not all missing children were at risk of extra-familial harm. A consistent annual pattern had been observed in missing episodes by gender, with more boys going missing in the run-up to Christmas and more girls in the summer months. This trend had been tracked over several years. The participation team was working with young people to better understand the reasons behind this pattern;
- e) Repeat missing episodes were often linked to a specific cohort of young people, particularly those in care or at risk of exploitation. Persistent engagement was required to build trust with adolescents, many of whom did not perceive themselves to be at risk. The service aimed to intervene early and reduce repeat episodes through sustained engagement;
- f) Large volumes of data were collected daily, including through the Daily Intelligence Briefing, which highlighted children who had gone missing, been in custody, or been referred due to exploitation concerns. Exploitation was often hidden and difficult to detect, and intelligence gathering required trust and persistence. The service was working to strengthen its ability to identify children on the cusp of exploitation and criminality, with a focus on community intelligence and early intervention;

- g) While additional resources were always needed, particularly for 16–17-year-olds presenting as homeless, the Council had made significant progress in working preventatively with families. In the previous six months, four young people had entered care following homelessness presentations, with the majority being supported to return home safely. The service was proud of this achievement and continued to work closely with families and communities;
- h) The homelessness team, criminal justice system, edge of care teams, and BeSafe teams were being brought together to expand the range of support available to vulnerable young people. Young Devon was highlighted as a strategic partner providing accommodation and support for young people in the city;
- i) While it was difficult to quantify the presence of grooming gangs due to their covert nature, there had previously been seven known county lines into Plymouth, primarily from Manchester and London. Any single line was considered a serious concern. The Council worked with schools and communities to offer positive alternatives and disrupt exploitation networks;
- j) The Council welcomed any national initiative that raised awareness of exploitation, including the government's national inquiry into grooming gangs. Plymouth was described as a relatively safe city with a strong child-centred policing team, but it was reiterated that one child impacted was one child too many;
- k) PL4 and PL5 postcodes appeared more frequently due to their larger population sizes. The Council had worked with schools in those areas to raise awareness and was finalising analysis to confirm the proportionality of the data. It was suggested that future reports include actual numbers alongside pie chart segments to aid interpretation;
- l) The Outside Plymouth segment of the pie chart within the report referred to Plymouth children in care who were placed outside the city.

The Panel agreed to:

- 1. Note the information contained within the report.
- 2. Endorse the continued work of the service to provide a response to children who go missing and are at risk of harm outside the home.

21. **Performance Scorecard**

Paul Stephens (Performance Advisor) presented the report to the Panel and highlighted the following key points:

- a) The report covered the period from April to June 2025;

- b) There has been a revision of Plymouth's statistical neighbours by the Department for Education (DfE). A new annex had been added to the report to reflect those changes and list the updated statistical neighbours. Additional indicators had also been introduced within the Education, Participation and Skills section.

In response to questions raised it was reported that:

- c) The Department for Education (DfE) used a complex formula to determine statistical neighbours. This formula considered multiple factors, including population characteristics, deprivation indices, and other demographic data. He acknowledged that the methodology was not fully transparent and could result in Plymouth being listed as a neighbour to certain authorities without reciprocal listing;
- d) Cornwall and Torbay were listed as statistical neighbours, which could present opportunities for shared practice.

Action:

- Paul Stephens would provide a detailed explanation of how the Department for Education determined statistical neighbour groupings.

The Panel agreed to:

- I. Note the report.

22. **Action Log**

The action log's progress was noted by the Panel.

23. **Work Programme**

There were no additions made to the work programme.

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