

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

13 September 2023 – At a meeting of the Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee held at 10.30 am at County Hall, Chichester, PO19 1RQ.

Present: Cllr Linehan (Chairman)

Cllr Baldwin	Cllr Hall	Mr Lloyd
Cllr Cherry	Cllr McGregor	Cllr Lord
Cllr Cornell	Cllr Smith	Cllr Nagel, left 12.50pm
Cllr Dabell	Mr Cristin	

Apologies were received from Cllr Burgess, Cllr Evans, Cllr Mercer, Cllr Sparkes, Mrs Oldroyd, Mrs Coles and Lucy Butler

Also in attendance: Cllr Russell

13. Declarations of Interests

13.1 In accordance with the County Council's code of conduct the following declarations were made:

13.2 Cllr Cherry declared a personal interest as the Vice-Chairman of Governors at the Burgess Hill Academy, under agenda item no 7.

13.3 Cllr Linehan declared a personal interest as the parent of a child with an EHCP, under agenda item no 7.

13.4 Cllr Smith declared a personal interest as the parent of a child with and EHCP, under agenda item no 7.

14. Urgent Matters

14.1 Two urgent matters had been raised with the Chairman and discussion was as follows.

Woodlands Mead School

14.2 The Cabinet Member for Children, Young People, Learning and Skills, Cllr Russell, reported to the Committee that despite being assured by the contractor building the new school in early August that the site would be ready on time, it had become apparent by mid-August that the contractor would be unable to meet the 25 August 2023 sectional completion deadline, nor would they complete it within the contingency week. The Cabinet Member and officers were keen to ensure there were no further slippages on competition dates and that they were stress testing a renewed completion date supplied by the contractor to ensure it would be deliverable for the building to be transferred in the right manner and right condition. However further information sought from the contractor had

been slow coming in. The completion date would be published as soon as possible.

14.3 The Property Department had been monitoring performance of the contractor against the contract programme and advised the contractor that the target would be missed. It was reported that problems with both labour and materials shortages had caused the delays.

14.4 It was noted that demolition notices for the old school building had been submitted to local residents by the contractor too early, causing confusion for parents.

14.5 Members sought reassurance that communications would be maintained with families to provide clarity on the revised opening.

Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC)

14.6 The Cabinet Member for Children, Young People, Learning and Skills reported to the Committee that it was believed that there was no RAAC in West Sussex maintained schools and a programme of inspections would be undertaken on 114 schools to confirm it is not present. The inspections are due to be completed by December 2024, however every effort would be made to accelerate this. The outcomes of the inspections would be made publicly available once complete. In March 2023 the Department for Education (DfE) had contacted the County Council to complete and questionnaire. That had been duly done and returned. Then at the end of August the DfE issued a new set of guidance instructing schools where RAAC had been found to close off those areas. The DfE had defined 114 maintained schools in West Sussex where they felt further investigation work was needed. Further information and support from the DfE was not forthcoming.

14.7 One academy school in West Sussex had also been identified where RAAC was believed to be in the building, however the school remained open. The Assistant Director (Property and Assets) informed the Committee that that the responsibility for maintenance of academy buildings lay with the academy or academy trust but the County Council would be happy to help with research of its files if schools did not have information such as building plans. The DfE were working directly with academy schools.

15. Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee

15.1 Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 June 2023 be approved as a correct record and that they be signed by the Chairman.

16. Responses to Recommendations

16.1 The Committee noted the responses to the recommendations provided from recent meetings.

16.2 The Chairman said he would be asking for some more substantive responses on some of the items and would share them with the Committee members.

17. Response to Inspection of West Sussex local authority children's services (ILACS)

17.1 The Cabinet Member for Children, Young People, Learning and Skills, Cllr Russell, introduced the report which came six months after the Inspection of West Sussex local authority children's services (ILACS). The report outlined everything the service had been working on since the inspection. A focussed visit was expected in spring 2024 and the DfE would undertake a 6-month review at the end of October 2023. Additionally, an external review of the Family Safeguarding Model was being undertaken by the University of Bedfordshire.

17.2 The members of the Committee asked questions and a summary of those questions and answers follows.

17.3 Governance arrangements for the continual practice improvement plan (CPIP) – The Committee were reassured that the information gathered is shared in each direction, up and down, via regular sessions with staff on the shop floor, workshops, problem solving events, staff survey and feedback from families.

17.4 The consistent quality and effectiveness of assessments and plans for children in need and children in need of protection - Members questioned the percentage of visits to children taking place within 5 days which suggested a third of children would not be seen within 5 days and requested more detail. The Committee were advised that sometimes social workers were unable to see the child, but would persist in trying to do so but would also do some follow up work with other teams who might have access to the child, such as health partners, police, etc. Members asked for more information on this area to be supplied.

17.5 Timeliness of initial health assessments and access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) – The initial health check is a statutory requirement which takes place for all children coming into care but does not override any pre-existing diagnosis or specialist areas. The Committee were advised that performance had increased and was now strong and the County Council were in the top percentile regionally for the completion of Initial Health Assessments. Additionally dental services for children coming into care, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, were around 77%, whereas many other authorities were a lot lower. Work with the Children in Care Council had helped achieve this level.

17.6 The waiting list for CAHMS, which could be more than two years, was a focus for the leadership team via the Integrated Care Board who monitored the performance of the Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust who deliver the service. Data from CAHMS was being regularly reviewed by the service.

17.7 The response to children aged 16-17 who are homeless – The Committee were advised that the term homelessness covered young people not in a stable family/partner environment. Intervention would

take place immediately to work through options and ensure safe and appropriate accommodation was put in place.

17.8 Addressing areas of continuing under performance – Members asked how the service would ensure areas where performance had improved would be monitored to keep quality high and how the scrutiny committee could monitor all areas. The Committee was assured that quality was reviewed weekly and monthly at a performance meeting and then the leadership team would do deep dives into areas of concern. This monitoring would never cease. It was agreed to share a report with the Committee ahead of each Business Planning Group meeting so that they could monitor and identify any areas for scrutiny.

17.9 Resolved – That the Committee:

1. Recognises the progress made and highlights the importance of ensuring there is continued improvement across all areas of the service, not just those identified within the Practice Action Plans.
2. Highlights the importance of getting qualitative feedback on the quality of services and the experiences of children and families to demonstrate how practice is improving.
3. Requests that an update on the KPIs identified to measure progress of the Practice Action Plans is provided to Committee members ahead of each Business Planning Group so that they can identify if there any potential areas for scrutiny.
4. Requests a short update on what is being done to support those children in need or protection who are unable to be visited within the 5-day deadline.

18. The Care Leavers Service in West Sussex

18.1 The Cabinet Member for Children, Young People, Learning and Skills, Cllr Russell, introduced the report which showed the service had made significant strides in recent years. There was still room for improvement as identified in the ILACS report but putting the voice of the child at the centre was at the heart of all work. She particularly thanked the Care Leaver's Advisory Board (CLAB) for the huge amount of work they had done with other agencies to lead the way on the offer for all care leavers.

18.2 The members of the Committee asked questions and a summary of those questions and answers follows.

18.3 A member questioned the availability of information on the **entitlement of care leavers** and how widely this was publicised. The Committee were informed that the local offer was well documented, including being available on the Your Space website, social workers and personal assistants should be proactive in speaking to young people about it and welcome and information packs were shared with young people when they move into the care leaver group. It was acknowledged that social workers and personal assistants were sometimes under pressure due to the number of young people they supported but it was hoped to

reduce these numbers so that they could be proactive rather than just reactive.

18.4 A business case had been written and was being assessed by the leadership team to allocate **personal assistants** earlier (at 16 and 16½ years-of-age). It was hoped to have more information for the Committee by the November meeting. Members expressed that they hoped that other pressures on young people, such as examinations, would be considered when they are transferred to a personal assistant and were informed it was the young person's decision when they wish to have the support.

18.5 Work had taken place with housing providers and district and borough councils in West Sussex who had all signed up to a **Joint Housing Protocol** which gave a quality framework and action plan with timescales and escalation processes. The first series of meetings had taken place and each district and borough council had committed to deliver four properties each year for care leavers. The Committee were keen that elected County Council members, who held roles on district or borough councils, be called upon to promote the scheme. The Cabinet Member reported that she was tabling a Notice of Motion at Mid Sussex District Council to highlight the indirect duty of care to wrap around the most vulnerable, and encouraged other Members with dual roles to do the same.

18.6 The **House Project** in Crawley, for children in care and care leavers transitioning into independent living, was praised by members who had visited it. Members highlighted that the positioning of the House Project base in Crawley meant not all care leavers could access it and asked whether an online format of it be developed. The Committee were advised that cohort 2 was open for referrals and would start 4-6 months earlier than planned due to the success of cohort 1. Additionally, the service were looking into the opportunity of a south coast corridor project to widen the reach.

18.7 The Chairman raised the work of the Voice and Participation Team on the use of **language** within the County Council's culture. The Committee were told that a lot of work had been undertaken with young people about the language and terms they would like used. This resulted in terms like Looked After Children, Children Looked After and their abbreviations ceasing to be used. The language was revisited each year through the Terms of Reference for the Corporate Parenting Panel involving Children in Care Council (CiCC) and CLAB.

18.8 A **Leadership Training Programme** for CLAB was underway, the budget was being spent on work with external providers, coaching and mentoring as well as a residential course. This had boosted the confidence of care leavers who had been involved in projects like co-facilitating work with the University of Chichester with up-and-coming social workers. Work was in progress, given the effectiveness of this year's programme, to see how increased funding could be found for next year's programme.

18.9 Resolved – That the Committee:

1. Welcomes the work being progressed to provide Personal Advisors to children we care for between 16 and 16½ years-of-age, and the importance of considering where the child is in their education and training when transferring to a PA. The Committee asks to be kept updated on the progress of this and when implementation is expected.
2. Was pleased to hear of the ongoing positive collaborative work with district and borough councils on support for care leavers and suggests that the service continues to engage with County Councillors, especially those who are dual hatters, on how they can assist in continuing this work.
3. Recognises the importance of language and welcomes the work ongoing to raise awareness of this.
4. Thanks the staff and young people from the House Project for the visit and the excellent work it is delivering. The Committee were reassured to hear that work is progressing to explore expanding the project in the south of the county.
5. Would welcome the opportunity for Committee members to observe a future Corporate Parenting Panel meeting and ask that this is explored.

19. **Performance and Resources Report 2023-24 - Quarter 1 - April-June 2023**

19.1 The Cabinet Member for Children, Young People, Learning and Skills, Cllr Russell, introduced the report highlighting the ongoing financial challenges caused by placement of children with disabilities, project overspends and home to school transport costs.

19.2 The members of the Committee asked questions and a summary of those questions and answers follows.

19.3 **Performance Measure 1** – The **percentage of re-referrals within 12 months of a previous referral** was stable and reducing despite an overall increase in child protection plans. As it covered any child who had been on plan at any time it meant that recent pressures, such as the cost-of-living crisis, could put pressure on family circumstances and lead to re-referrals.

19.4 **Performance Measure 27** – The **Percentage achieving expected standard in reading, writing and maths combined at end of Key Stage 2** had dropped and the data for 2023 was still awaited. Work was underway with disadvantaged pupils and learning would be shared more widely.

19.5 **Performance Measure 56** - Members questioned why the percentage of **Education, Health and Care Plans** (EHCPs) assessments completed within 20 weeks had dropped to 1.1%. The Committee were

informed that this was a key area of focus, and that the current performance was not acceptable for children and families. The drop in performance had been impacted in part by the holiday periods and the team were working on better organisation to maintain resilience in the team in future. Funding had been made available to those who were waiting beyond 20 weeks for an assessment to be completed. Officers were ensuring those with the most needs were processed quickly. Further information would be shared with the Committee at the November meeting as part of the scrutiny of the SEND improvement plan. Members questioned what the impact of the DfE proposal to reduce the number of EHCPs by 20% would be. The Committee were advised that through the Delivering Better Value programme robust discussions were being had with the DfE about the impact of the proposed reduction.

19.6 Performance Measure 57 – The Committee questioned if this figure was high due to a lack of capacity for children with EHCPs to access specialist education, and therefore should not be reported as green. The Committee were informed that the default position is for children to be in mainstream education if it is appropriate.

Finance Summary

19.7 Placements and related costs for children seeking asylum – It was confirmed that the grant from the Home Office was only applicable until a child's 18th birthday after which the young people fell into the same arrangements for statutory obligations for any child living in the area which the County Council must absorb. This put the financial cost into the areas of the care leavers service, district and borough council housing, etc. The County Council had accepted all children through the National Transfer Scheme and had reached out to Kent County Council to support another 10 from their area. Many of the children seeking asylum arrive at the ages of 17 years old or more so funding can be for a short period only although the County Council then has a statutory duty to support them through the care leavers service until the age of 25 years old.

19.8 Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) – The Committee heard that working was underway across the service to mitigate costs down. The Government was still allowing DSG deficits to stay off the budget books but that could end at any time. The Delivering Better Value project was looking at ways to reduce spending but the increase in demand would not help. Information would be included in the report to the November meeting.

Savings Delivery Update

19.9 Fostering Redesign – A member asked for an explanation for the limited growth of in-house foster carer placements and what was being done to improve the situation. The Committee were advised that the service had been moving more children from residential care which had led to a slight increase in the use of independent fostering agencies. There had also been a record number of children asking to remain with their foster carers when they reach older years (staying put) which had an impact on the number of available foster carers. There had however been

an increase in enquiries from people who wanted to become foster carers with more in the first quarter this year than in the whole of the last year.

19.10 Capital Programme – Members raised concern as to how members could scrutinise the performance of the delivery of education projects in the Capital Programme, for which the responsibility fell to the Property and Assets team. The Cabinet Member for Children, Young People, Learning and Skills reported that she had been working with the leadership team, other cabinet members and officers to ensure there was closer alignment between education and property. She felt it was also essential to have education support at project boards. It was agreed it would be helpful to separate out projects in delivery and those practically complete to have a better overview of progress for future papers.

19.11 Resolved – That the Committee:

1. Raises their continued concern of the under-performance in timeliness of EHCP assessments and will look in more detail at the recovery plans around this at the Committee meeting in November.
2. Welcomes that discussions are ongoing with the DfE around the targets being proposed to reduce the number of EHCPs being issued.
3. Recognises the current budget pressures in placements and home to school transport as well as the pressure on the Dedicated School Grant and will continue to monitor these through the Quarterly Performance and Resources Report.
4. Highlights the importance of collaborative cross service work for the delivery of Education Capital Projects and the Committee will continue to explore the best way to scrutinise the progress of projects.
5. Asks if future Capital Programme reports can separate out projects in delivery and those practically complete to have a better overview of progress.
6. Any questions that there had not been time for would be collated and a response provided by officers.

20. Work Programme Planning and Possible Items for Future Scrutiny

20.1 The Committee received a tabled revised Work Programme following the Business Planning Group meeting on 8 September 2023.

20.2 The Committee noted the revised Work Programme and the Chairman reminded Committee members that any items for consideration could be put forward at any time for consideration by the Business Planning Group.

21. Requests for Call-In

21.1 There had been no requests for call-in to the Scrutiny Committee within its constitutional remit since the date of the last meeting.

22. Date of Next Meeting

22.1 The next meeting would be held on 15 November 2023 at 10.30am.

The meeting ended at 1.21 pm

Chairman