

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

15 November 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 Dabell	Cllr Sparkes
Cllr Burgess	Cllr Evans	Mrs Oldroyd
Cllr Cherry	Cllr McGregor	Mrs Coles, left 1pm
Cllr Cornell	Cllr Smith, left 1.35pm	

Apologies were received from Cllr Mercer, Mr Cristin and Mr Lloyd

Absent: Cllr Hall

Also in attendance: Cllr Russell

23. Declarations of Interests

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

23.2 Cllr Linehan declared a personal interest as the parent of a child with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), under agenda item no 5.

23.3 Cllr Smith declared a personal interest as the parent of a child with an EHCP, and a member of the West Sussex Parent Carer Forum, under agenda item no 5.

23.4 Cllr Cherry declared a personal interest as the Vice-Chairman of Governors at the Burgess Hill Academy, which is a member of the University of Brighton Academy Trust, under agenda item no 6.

24. Urgent Matters

24.1 No urgent matters were raised.

25. Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee

25.1 Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 September 2023 be approved as a correct record and that they be signed by the Chairman.

26. Responses to Recommendations

26.1 Resolved – That the Committee notes the responses to the recommendations provided from recent meetings.

27. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Improvement Plan

27.1 The Cabinet Member, Cllr Russell, introduced the report highlighting that following the full Ofsted inspection in spring 2023 the leadership team had undertaken a comprehensive review of all areas of the service and concluded that Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) was an area of priority for transformation. A full review had been undertaken along with a refresh of SEND governance and partnership arrangements which had resulted in a more robust independently chaired SEND and Alternative Provision Strategy and Partnership Board (S&APSPB) to provide challenge and support. A transformation programme had been put in place that could take up to two years to fully implement. Since the despatch of the agenda papers the SEND area inspection by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission had begun and the outcomes would be fed into the transformation programme. The Cabinet Member confirmed the commitment to improving outcomes for children and families was confident that there were robust plans in place to deliver the improvement needed.

27.2 The Director of Children, Young People and Learning and the Interim Assistant Director (Learning and Skills) summarised the key points from the report.

27.3 The Committee heard from Mrs Westwood, Chief Executive Officer of the West Sussex Parent Carer Forum (WSPCF), who thanked the County Council for the involvement of the Forum in the new SEND improvement plan. The Forum team felt they were being listened to and their contributions valued, but WSPCF do not have full confidence in the plan. There was visible energy and drive around the world of SEND and a commitment in putting together robust plans. However, Mrs Westwood said she struggled to reconcile the work seen with the reality that parents were facing, from her own perspective as a parent and giving an example of a parent who had been in contact with the Forum. She felt the delays in completing the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) assessment process were not solely down to recent increased demand and the extension of requests to those up to 25 years of age. They were also the result of years of unchallenged underperformance. It was felt there was a lack of transparency in every part of the service and she hoped the recovery plan would not only address performance but focus on improving outcomes for children and their families.

27.4 Mrs Westwood reported that the WSPCF had undertaken a survey to seek parent carer views on the EHCP process. She had shared a presentation with the S&APSPB on the outcomes of the survey and would be happy to share with the Committee members.

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

27.6 The Committee highlighted the impact the current performance was having on children and their families. Parents needed to see actions and changes to the current position. Communication with parents was a key area for improvement and some quick and easy changes needed to be

made to provide adequate levels of communication. A member suggested that including the voice of the child could be supported by use of the Mind Of My Own app and officers agreed it would be an excellent way of involving young people.

27.7 Some members felt that the decision to temporarily make funding available at 20 weeks (legal time limit) if a plan still had not been completed to support school resilience was not yet making a difference. It was important that parents were made aware of its availability and what support this could provide.

27.8 Through the Government pilot Delivering Better Value, the service confirmed that it informed the Department for Education (DfE) to advise that the County Council would not be implementing the proposed 20% reduction in assessment numbers.

27.9 The numbers of EHCP assessments being requested had started to rise following Government reforms several years earlier but had accelerated since the pandemic. There had been a focus on early years and some additional posts around SEND support had been created, and an early years' strategy was being developed. Members were keen to know how much of the increase in requests for EHCP assessments had been caused by the expansion of support for those from 16 up to the age of 25 years-of-age and would be keen to see some data on this.

27.10 The SEND Sufficiency plan had expanded all special schools in terms of their ability to increase places, including looking at the establishment of satellite sites using existing buildings. The Special Support Centres planned were yet to come online. Work was also being undertaken on understanding the complexity of need in schools and how mainstream schools could better meet those needs.

27.11 Whilst the EHCP timeliness was being addressed, requests for assessments for the most vulnerable children were being prioritised. The service is totally committed to getting back to meeting the 20-week deadline. The backlog in requests will be dealt with by a temporary agency team. Educational Psychologists will be looking into a different way of working, focussing on a person-centred approach.

27.12 The Committee sought assurance that the focus on the SEND improvement work would not impact the resources available to other areas of the service. It was confirmed that the focus on SEND would not be to the detriment of children's social care which would continue its improvement journey. Some improvement officers would now focus on the SEND recovery plan as the methodology used for the social care transformation would be transferrable.

27.13 The focus on rapid improvement to a steady state was looking at sustainability and resilience in the service, including recruiting additional staff to give capacity to provide flexibility, such as work on parents' complaints. There would be a focus on staff training e.g. how to deal with parents, developing skills and knowledge and how to make improvements to the experience and outcomes for parents, carers and young people. Resources had been secured to expand the service and recruitment had

been quite successful despite a national shortage of educational psychologists. Further work would look at the two geographically split teams through a series of workshops with managers, staff, and parent carers to ensure the service is working effectively in the future. The County Council works with a DfE network of 19 local authorities in the south-east to share good practice and improvements, to help deal with this national problem.

27.14 A member of the Youth Cabinet raised the long time it had taken for a family member to have their EHCP assessment undertaken. They asked why it was not done sooner when the child had noticeable problems since birth. Officers responded that from birth the child would have had a health plan and an education plan would only have been required later.

27.15 The process for EHCP assessments is the same across the country and is defined within the SEND code of practice. There are ebbs and flows in the number of requests received e.g. the number of parental requests increases after the summer holidays and data is monitored for trends. The area SEND inspection would help compare the County Council's performance against other local authorities. Any changes to the improvement plan workstreams following the outcomes of the inspection would be shared with members.

27.16 The SEND notional budget provided to schools to support SEN children is based on a formula determined by central Government with differing rates for primary and secondary schools. Top ups for children with EHCPs comes from the High Needs Budget which the County Council has influence over.

27.17 The service were looking to establish an Education and Skills Board, comprising of stakeholders from early years to university level. The Board would discuss priorities for collective action and help link to the SEND and Inclusion Strategy and the Education and Learning Strategy. SEND is likely to be a key priority for discussion.

27.18 The service was working to provide an effective IT system across the whole service so that a single view of the child could be provided. Information can be shared with Committee members in the future.

27.19 A member asked how the County Council could support those with SEND in the 16-25 age range into employment and training. It was reported that work was in progress on supported internships with businesses who were keen to support and agreed that this was an important area to develop to support young people as they move into adulthood.

27.20 Cllr Wall, the Chairman of the Health and Adult Services Scrutiny Committee, had followed the item and welcomed the challenging discussion. He had been keen to understand the challenges faced by young people as they transition through to Adult Services at the County Council.

27.21 Resolved – That the Committee:

1. Acknowledges that the service is not currently where it needs to be, and that there are key fundamental issues that need addressing to improve outcomes and experiences for children, young people and families.
2. Considers it imperative that the experiences of families are listened to throughout the improvement process and that their views on how the improvements are creating better outcomes are sought throughout the improvement journey.
3. Highlights communication to parents and carers as a top area for improvement and ask that this is progressed as a priority as part of the improvement plan.
4. Discussed the prioritisation of children awaiting assessments, and how the backlog is being managed. The Committee are glad to hear that those most vulnerable children are currently being prioritised for EHCP assessment so that they get the support that they need while the improvements to assessment timeliness are made.
5. Welcomes that the County Council will not be progressing with the DfE proposed target of reducing EHCPs by 20%, as this is not the right focus or driver for tackling demand.
6. Asks that the County Council explore in more detail what can be done to support young people into employment and training and also whether the Mind of My Own app can be used to capture the views and experiences of young people with SEND.
7. Agrees that the Committee should have regular oversight of SEND improvement plan to assess the progress being made on improving outcomes and experiences for children and families and will add it as a standing item to their work programme for scrutiny.

28. Performance and Resources Report 2023-24 - Quarter 2 - July-September 2023

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

28.2 Performance Measure 2 – Percentage Early Help Plans closed with outcomes met – The Department of Levelling Up and Communities (DfLUC) has a strict criteria that the service is measured against, and that does not necessarily equate to whether the circumstances for the child or family have improved, e.g. outcomes might not be met if parental consent is withdrawn. Officers were confident this was not a reflection of the quality of service provided by early help and a huge amount of work was underway to raise performance to meet DfLUC outcomes.

28.3 Performance Measure 7 – Stability of children looked after placements – The data sets for these figures report on a yearly basis, figures are still being impacted by the closure of a national provider of a significant number of children’s homes and the movement from unregistered to registered placements, however it is an improving picture.

28.4 Performance Measure 8 – Support for care leavers to achieve their aspirations – A variance of 10% on the target figure would be the difference between amber and red. Recently the County Council agreed a notice of motion to treat care leavers as a protected characteristic. Work is ongoing with HR colleagues through a specific task and finish group on skills to extend the apprenticeship scheme within the authority to care leavers. A scheme is also underway with a large employer in the region. Discussion is also taking place with neighbouring authorities who have adopted the same protected characteristics on reciprocal arrangements for care leavers.

28.5 Performance Measure 27 – Percentage achieving expected standard in reading, writing and maths combined at the end of Key Stage 2 – The drop in performance for the academic year 2021/22 when pupils did not have enough time practicing writing due to the pandemic, has led to a writing project with a group of schools to develop good practice. This will be shared with other schools across the county. Early indications for the 2022/23 results show West Sussex results tracking the national average. More data can be provided including demographic detail. It was noted that the Committee had identified Educational Attainment as an item for future scrutiny.

28.6 Performance Measures 56 and 57 – More challenging targets are being worked on. Under measure 57, the figure is a good indicator of inclusivity.

28.7 9 Bedelands Academy (Capital Programme) – The process of preparing a retendering document is under way, it is hoped to appoint a contractor in spring 2024.

28.8 Resolved – That the Committee:

1. Acknowledges the current performance and budget position, noting the budget pressures on increased high costs placements and the home to school transport as a result of the increase in EHCPs.
2. Would like to understand the attainment challenges in writing at Key Stage 2 and the work being done to address this, and will look at this when considering an item on Educational Attainment at a future meeting.
3. Recognises the work being undertaken to understand and improve performance of Early Help Plan outcomes met (Performance Measure 2).

4. Welcomes the work being progressed following the endorsement at County Council to treat Care Leavers as a protected characteristic.

29. Council Plan, Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Preparations for 2024/25 Draft Budget

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

29.2 Initiatives were in train through a task and finish group to look at ways to reduce the costs for external taxis and minibuses for **home to school transport** e.g. reviewing policy to look at what is statutory and non-statutory and the differences in cost, providing independent travel training for young people particularly for after primary school, vehicle occupancy numbers and parent's mileage allowance.

29.3 Work to **improve the use of kinship placements** was being undertaken to provide the same level of support and an uplift in fees as foster carers. Kinship carers are also entitled to the same level of support for adaptation and adaptations as foster carers.

29.4 It was highlighted that the budget reductions being put forward for this portfolio were efficiency savings rather than cuts to services and it was important to make this clear in any future communications on the budget. The Cabinet Member confirmed that areas of improvement and future demand had been looked at to offer these efficiencies and subsequent savings.

29.5 Resolved – That the Committee:

1. Recognises the pressures on the home to school transport budget, and welcome the work being undertaken to review the current arrangements.
2. Recognises the impact of reduced government funding on the budget, and supports the continued lobbying of government by the Cabinet Member on this. The Committee would welcome to be kept updated on any lobbying.
3. Wishes to explore of whether any performance measures around those with EHCPS not accessing education and the SEND journey should be included.
4. Highlights that any communications should be clear that the budget reductions being put forward for this portfolio are efficiencies rather than cuts to services.

30. Work Programme Planning and Possible Items for Future Scrutiny

30.1 The Committee agreed to move the Family Safeguard Model item to the June meeting and move the School Place Planning item to the January meeting.

30.2 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.

31. Requests for Call-In

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

32. Date of Next Meeting

32.1 The next meeting would be held on 17 January 2024 at 10.30am.

The meeting ended at 1.59 pm

Chairman