

BOURNEMOUTH, CHRISTCHURCH AND POOLE COUNCIL
CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the Meeting held on 19 September 2023 at 6.00 pm

Present:-

Cllr B Dove – Chair

Present: Cllr O Brown, Cllr B Chick, Cllr E Harman, Cllr B Hitchcock,
Cllr S Mackrow, Cllr D Martin, Cllr A-M Moriarty, Cllr C Adams and
Cllr M Dower

Co-Opted Members: P Martin, M Saxby, S Welch, D Rees-Coshan, A Hodges, H Maftah
and Z Sosic.

18. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Broadhead, Bull and Cooper.

19. Substitute Members

Cllr Dower substituted for Cllr Cooper and Cllr Adams substituted for Cllr Broadhead.

20. Declarations of Interests

Cllr Harmon declared an interest as they had just started the process for obtaining an EHCP for her child, Cllr Moriarty declared an interest as she worked with children with EHCPs and SEND and Cllr Dove declared an interest as a family member was in receipt of an EHCP.

21. Confirmation of Minutes

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 6 June 2023 were confirmed as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

22. Action sheet

The Chair requested the Committee note the action sheet and consider it outside of the Committee.

23. Public Issues

A question has been received from Mr Adam Sofianos

"A critical role of Educational Psychologists is around Education, Health and Care Plans. As already noted, demand for new Plans has increased considerably, but staffing remains low.

Council is working under Government's *Delivering Better Value* programme. It was recently revealed that this is delivered through a major consultancy contract with Newton Europe. It's reported to include a cost-saving target, to reduce new Plans by at least 20%.

Additionally, Council has been invited to join the *Safety Valve* programme, which contractually binds councils to cost-saving targets, and is also said to target Plan reductions.

Could you confirm: what directions or recommendations were made arising from the current programme, including in the management plan?

And could you reassure the many worried parents, that any decision to join *Safety Valve* will be subject to proper scrutiny, and a Council vote, and that Council will publish the draft contract and management plan beforehand?"

Source:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/sep/10/revealed-covert-deal-to-cut-help-for-pupils-in-england-with-special-needs>

Cllr Richard Burton, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, provided an answer as follows:

The following details the actions and workstreams of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and the Delivering Better Value (DBV) Programme:

- Investment in the DBV workstreams to create capacity, including robust advice for parents, carers and professionals to stem the growth of EHCPs and improved implementation of the graduated early support response.
- Planning capacity - The Capital Expansion Programme and Graduated Pathway Programme which aims to improve inclusion in Mainstream Schools and to increase number of placements in BCP to reduce the demand on specialist settings.
- Dynamic EHCP support to improve timeliness of new EHCPs and Annual Reviews of EHCPs.
- Embedding a culture of Co-production so service delivery is driven by the lived experience of parents and carers and children and young people.

BCP Council's DSG Management Plan sets out the Council's strategy for reforming its high needs system, enabling it to function sustainably and in the best interests of children and young people in the BCP area.

Safety Valve Programme

In August 2023, BCP Council were invited to join the DfE's Safety Valve Programme. Safety Valve agreements hold local authorities to account for delivery of reforms to their high needs systems, so that they can function sustainably and therefore in the best interests of the children and young people they serve. These local authorities will be expected to reach an in-year balance on their DSG as quickly as possible, and over time eliminate their deficits.

Local authorities with Safety Valve agreements are asked to focus on one mission statement: to develop plans to reform their high needs systems as quickly as possible to provide a good service within their available funding. In addition, there are two principal goals which are critical for a local authority's ability to reach a sustainable position:

- appropriately managing demand EHCPs, including assessment processes that are fit for purpose.
- use of appropriate and cost-effective provision - this includes ensuring mainstream schools are equipped and encouraged to meet needs where possible, whilst maintaining high standards for all pupils and reducing exclusions.

A public statement has been received from Mr Daniel Parkin as follows:

What's happening the youth in BCP? The least we can do is consider what we have done, think about these young people and what we can collectively do to help these children and turn their lives around. We being council staff, the public and you as councillors.

You have an opportunity here to make things happen. Some people accuse me of blaming the current administration - I am not. I am challenging you all to improve the children's services department.

We cannot have a situation where a resident is told one thing under FOI and when brought up in council meeting told something completely different. Who do we believe? And when the trust is gone this seriously concerns me as to how our vulnerable children are being treated. As corporate parents would that concern you? I hope it does, as these vulnerable children need your support now.

24. Members of Youth Parliament Annual Report

The Members of Youth Parliament presented a report, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'A' to these Minutes in the Minute Book.

The report summarised the activity and outcomes achieved by the members of Youth Parliament in 2022/23 and outlined the intended work to the end of their term in March 2024.

The Committee considered the report and made the following comments:

- The Committee were grateful for the report and very impressed by the work that the MYPs had undertaken.
- In response to a query, the Committee was advised of the need to really engage in any way possible with the new MYPs including providing contact details and links with others who can help them assist in their aims.
- A Member advised that they undertook youth surgeries within schools and she advised she would make contact with the MYPs to discuss further. **ACTION.**
- In response to a query regarding a handover period, the Committee was advised of the process of recruiting the new MYPs and how the outgoing MYPs would support that process.
- In response to a query about the work done regarding PHSE in schools, the Committee was advised that politics was not taught enough within schools and there was some discussion about how this could be increased without having any political bias and the MYP advised he felt that it was not just a local issue, but a national issue which needed progression.
- The Chair highlighted the MYPs gratitude for the Corporate Director of Children's Services and the support she had provided them.
- In response to a query regarding the MYPs lack of connection with the rest of the Council services, the Chair advised she felt that they needed links to the staff network groups and to further promote the work they had done.
- An MYP highlighted that whilst their term as an MYP would end, they would still be happy to be involved in any way possible.
- The Participation Worker advised of the potential work which the MYPs could continue to do post 18 once their term had ended, which included a range of national opportunities. The Committee was also advised of some of the children in care and care experienced young people who were part of national schemes ran by the National Careleavers Benchmarking Forum and the Family Youth Justice Board.

It is RECOMMENDED that the Board note the information provided in the report and support the intended activity and outcomes outlined for 2023/24 and added a vote of thanks and recognition for all the work the MYPs had undertaken.

25. Children's Services Workforce Overview - Children's Social Care and SEND Improvement Journey Themed Item

The Corporate Director of Children Services presented a report, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'B' to these Minutes in the Minute Book.

The report detailed the issues, actions and journey travelled for Children's Services regarding the workforce. It dived deeper into the activity within Children's Social Care and Education and Skills separately.

Children's Social Care

- Recruitment and Retention remained a high focus area of attention in the Children's Services improvement journey. A Recruitment Campaign was launched in January 2023 which was proving successful with a 62% increase in permanent social work qualified staff across Children's Social Care services from Team Managers, Assistant Team Managers and Independent Reviewing Officers seeing the most success. The service still struggled to recruit experienced Social Workers within the broader context of a national social work crisis, which was reported widely in the UK.
 - 5400 social workers left the profession in 2022 (9% rise on 2021)
 - Number of social work vacancies in 2021 was 7900 (21% increase from 2021)
- Common reasons for leaving included more challenging caseloads stemmed from the lack of resources, pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis.
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Education and Skills

It was within the Educational Psychology Service that recruitment and retention pressures were felt in this area of Children's Services. Both nationally and locally, requests for Education, Health and Care needs assessments had risen significantly in recent years. This caused additional pressure on local authority educational psychology (EP) services. Nationally, councils were reporting that there were insufficient EPs to meet this demand.

The Committee discussed the report and comments were made, including:

- In response to Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) and the challenges with resources, the Committee was advised of the support and training that was provided to them, which included reduced caseloads, workforce development support, the opportunity to work in the different teams whilst responding to the required standards
- In response to a query regarding the use of Assistant Education Psychologists, the Committee was advised of their role and that their work was fully supported by a trained Education Psychologist in a work experience protected manner

- In response to a query regarding the budget and the projected budget for 2024/25, the Committee was advised of the staffing increases in terms of cost of living and how that would be managed against any efficiency savings. The Corporate Director of Children's Services advised she could provide the projected budget to the Committee. **ACTION.**
- A Committee Member highlighted, that in response to the public question, he would like to understand more about the SEND service's improvement journey and how it was delivering and the need for the Safety Valve to come back to Committee for consideration before any decisions were made. **ACTION.**
- In response to a query about any barriers preventing the service from recruiting the necessary permanent workforce, the Committee was advised of the positive impact the increased pay which could be offered, together with a speedier recruitment process had had to progress recruitment of permanent staff.
- In response to a query regarding the development of the workforce and the need to increase communication with staff, the Committee was advised that the culture was positively changing which could be demonstrated through various forums including Ofsted inspection results and by the recruitment of more permanent staff. In regard to communication, the Committee was advised the service now had a dedicated Children's Communication Officer who would consider this further.
- In response to a query regarding social workers being frontline workers and potentially working from home, it was acknowledged that there were social workers who lived outside the BCP area, however there was a clear expectation that they were available to see the people they were serving in person.

The Chair concluded by acknowledging there had been some actions discussed which would be considered further under forward planning and thanked all the staff for their work.

RECOMMENDED that the report be noted and any areas for further scrutiny be identified.

26. Ofsted Monitoring Visit 4 - Children in Care

The Corporate Director of Children's Services and Director of Corporate Parenting & Permanence presented a report, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member and a copy of which appears as Appendix 'C' to these Minutes in the Minute Book.

BCP Children's Services was inspected, under the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACs) framework in December 2021. The outcome was an overall inadequate judgement.

As a result, the Secretary of State of Education issued a Statutory Direction and appointed a DfE Improvement Adviser to support the Council in their improvement of Children's Social Care Services.

The Children's Services Improvement Plan was in place to ensure progress was made at pace in Children's Social Care in line with the recommendations of the December Inspection and in accordance with the statutory direction notice received by the Council in March 2022.

Overview and Scrutiny required regular updates on themes regarding improvement. In August 2023 Children's Services had their fourth Monitoring Visit, the letter published by Ofsted was presented for scrutiny alongside the attached presentation summarising the feedback from the inspectors during the Monitoring Visit.

The Committee discussed the report and comments were made, including:

- The Committee acknowledged the large amount of work that had been undertaken in a short space of time.
- In response to a query, the Director of Corporate Parenting & Permanence advised of the Quality Assurance Framework which had been developed ensuring any gaps were identified and closed to ensure the service was being the best corporate parent it could be. It was highlighted that it was a continuous evolving learning process.
- In response to a query about insufficient provision locally, the Committee was advised of the duty to have a sufficiency strategy which would set out how the needs of children and young people in care would be met. It was advised that the strategy needed updating and it was noted that there was a national crisis in respect of availability of homes for children who were unable to be looked after in their family network and the impact that had was detailed.
- In response to a query, the Committee was advised of the work done through the continuous self-assessment which identified strengths and weaknesses and that the Ofsted report confirmed the service was on the right track.
- In response to a query regarding the number of social workers a child would have contact with, the Committee was advised that the figure had reduced, was being constantly monitored and the reasons why changes with social workers was sometimes unavoidable.
- In response to a query regarding the children who were placed more than 20 miles away from their homes, the Committee was advised of the reasons for this, for example a child who was placed with family in Scotland or unaccompanied asylum seekers being placed in neighbouring authorities. The Committee was also advised of some of the reasons why a placement outside BCP could be beneficial and positive.
- In response to a query regarding commissioning with the NHS and other partner agencies, the Committee was advised of the ongoing work regarding connections with education and health and the work of the ICS and the place based needs which were highlighted specifically within BCP.

The Chair concluded the item by advising she had some actions which she wanted to progress and she would circulate them outside of the Committee.
ACTION.

RESOLVED that the report be noted for information and any future areas of scrutiny by considered.

27. Portfolio Holder Update

The Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People provided a verbal update which included:

- That he had recently visited the MASH and seen the case management system 'Mosaic' in use.
- Attended the Southwest Regional meeting of 15 Local Authorities (LA) with the Portfolio Holders and Corporate Directors of Children's Services and he noted that other LAs experienced the same issues as BCP and the desire to work together to achieve a unified approach.
- Visited the 333 Hub and highlighted the great work undertaken there.
- The SEND Accelerated Timeline report was coming to the next Cabinet and Committee Members could attend should they wish.
- Another DfE assurance was planned at the end of October and another Ofsted visit planned for end of October/early November.
- Highlighted the planned engagement event between the MYPs and Councillors.

28. Forward Plan

The Chair advised she wanted to discuss the future planning with the Committee outside of the meeting.

29. Dates of Future Meetings

The dates of the future meetings were noted.

The meeting ended at 7.43 pm

CHAIR