

PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the People Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Lewes on 22 July 2022.

PRESENT: Councillors Sam Adeniji, Penny di Cara, Kathryn Field, Nuala Geary, Ian Hollidge (substituting for Councillor Chris Dowling), Johanna Howell (Chair), Wendy Maples, Stephen Shing, John Ungar (Vice Chair), Mr John Hayling (Parent Governor Representative) and Mr Simon Parr (Roman Catholic Diocese Representative).

LEAD MEMBERS: Councillor Carl Maynard, Lead Member for Adult Social Care and Health
Councillor Bob Bowdler, Lead Member for Children and Families
Councillor Bob Standley, Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability (ISEND)

ALSO PRESENT: Alison Jeffery, Director of Children's Services
Ian Gutsell, Chief Finance Officer
Elizabeth Funge, Assistant Director Education
Samantha Williams, Assistant Director, Strategy, Commissioning and Supply Management
Mark Whiffin, Head of Finance, Children's Services
Janette Lyman, Strategic Lead: Inclusion and Support Services
Beth McGhee, Senior Policy and Scrutiny Adviser

1. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING - 24 MARCH 2022

1.1 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the minutes of the meeting held on 24 March 2022 as a correct record and agree the recommendations made at the meeting.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Charles Clark and Chris Dowling (substituted by Councillor Ian Hollidge), Mr Trevor Cristin (Diocese of Chichester Representative) and Mark Stainton (Director of Adult Social Care and Health).

3. DISCLOSURES OF INTERESTS

3.1 There were no disclosures of interests.

4. URGENT ITEMS

4.1 There were no urgent items.

5. SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER PRESENTATION

5.1 The Assistant Director Education delivered a presentation on the national reforms to education outlined in the Government's 'Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child' White Paper, and how East Sussex County Council was responding to the reforms with partners in the local education system. The Assistant Director covered in the presentation:

- **The national ambitions that the White Paper was working to achieve were very ambitious.** By way of an example, the White Paper set an ambition that by 2030, 90% of pupils at the end of primary school would meet the expected standard in reading, writing and maths combined at Key Stage 2. Early data for this academic year indicated just under 55% of pupils were achieving this ambition locally, and just under 59% nationally. Similarly, the White Paper set an ambition for a fully trust-led schools system, with all schools part of, or with plans to join, a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) by 2030. The gap between the current situation and the Government's ambition in East Sussex was explained; while nearly all special schools were academies, approximately two thirds of secondary schools were academies and approximately only one quarter of primary schools were academies (with 104 maintained primary schools).
- **The newly clarified role of local authorities in the education system as local authorities step away from maintaining schools.** Local authorities would have responsibility for: ensuring sufficiency of school places, school admissions, a strengthened safeguarding role and attendance. ESCC welcomed the clarified role of local authorities in championing the needs and interests of children, particularly the most vulnerable, to ensure they secure good educational outcomes.
- With regards to **the local authority role in attendance**, the Department for Education (DfE) had published another document 'Working together to improve attendance' which set out the responsibilities of all education system partners in ensuring good attendance in schools. The guidance would come into effect from September 2022, with an expectation the proposals would be fully implemented from September 2023. The Assistant Director noted that school attendance had been a challenging area for East Sussex for some time and was a heightened issue nationally, and locally, following the pandemic. The new attendance guidance set out new expectations for local authorities to know where children were, remove barriers to attendance and particularly focus on early help for families to remove barriers to attendance.
- **The local response to the White Paper, which had involved ESCC articulating its understanding of the reforms and roles the Council would play in the education system in future.** These roles were acting as an ambassador for children and young people, especially the most vulnerable; facilitating partnerships with and between schools to support inclusion and improvement; and shaping wider capacity in the system, including having strategic conversations with local and national MATs to ensure there was capacity for every school to be part of a strong family of schools in future.
- **The work that had taken place in response to, and areas that remained uncertain regarding, Government's policy for a fully trust-led schools system.** East Sussex had been identified as an Education Investment Area (EIA) (and Hastings was a priority EIA, as a successor to the Hastings Opportunity Area), which gave the county access to some schemes such as a levelling up funding premium for teachers in subject areas that were challenging to recruit to. EIAs were also prioritised for implementation of the plan for a fully trust-led schools system. DfE therefore expected to work with ESCC, the Regional Schools Commissioner and Dioceses to create a 'commissioning plan' covering how schools in East

Sussex would move into MATs. The Assistant Director noted options for Diocesan schools would be a key question in this work, given the number of Diocese primary schools in East Sussex. The Children's Services Department had started a 'big conversation' to hear the views of schools, trusts and the Dioceses as this work progressed.

- **The principles that had been agreed with school leaders to guide the system through discussions over the coming months.** In terms of the proposal in the White Paper for local authorities to establish MATs, ESCC was not currently minded to pursue this role and would instead focus on its role in the education system as honest broker and champion of children.

A copy of the presentation that was delivered was included in the meeting agenda.

5.2 The Chair thanked the Assistant Director for the presentation and the Committee asked a number of questions, which covered:

- **Presentation clarifications** – the Committee asked what the new 'arms-length curriculum body' mentioned in Chapter Two of the White Paper referred to. The Assistant Director clarified that this was referring to further development of the Oak Academy Trust which was a national resource developed during the pandemic to support schools with providing a digital curriculum and digital resources. The Committee also asked for more information about what resource would be devolved to Area Groups and/or Education Improvement Partnerships as part of ESCC's work to facilitate strong partnerships with and between schools, referenced on slide twelve of the presentation. The Assistant Director clarified that this work would involve looking at how existing resource could be deployed differently or more effectively through those groups. For example, the Department was currently undertaking work looking at how Secondary Area Groups used alternative provision to reduce exclusions. The Assistant Director confirmed that no additional resource had been allocated nationally to deliver the reforms. The Committee also sought confirmation that the Department would work with both the Church of England Diocese and Roman Catholic Diocese on the reforms in the coming months, which the Director of Children's Services confirmed.
- **School attendance and use of fines** – the Committee asked at what point the Department would consider use of fines in response to poor school attendance, given the potential that doing so could lead, in extreme and rare circumstances, to imprisonment. The Assistant Director responded that use of fines were an important aspect of the Council's response on attendance but would not be the Department's first response. The Assistant Director committed to provide the Committee with further detail on at what stage, and for what reasons, the Department would pursue fines and noted that the new attendance guidance mentioned in the presentation included sections on legal intervention and the powers local authorities could use. The Director of Children's Services added that the Department worked very hard to support parents to improve attendance and avoid the use of fines, but parents had a duty to ensure their children were in education (be that in a school or through Elective Home Education) and that fines and sanctions were an important part of ESCC being able to robustly exercise its role in ensuring children were receiving the quality of education they had a right to. The Lead Member for Education and ISEND reinforced this and welcomed plans in the Schools Bill to provide councils with more powers to understand when children were being home educated.
- **Lengthened school week** - the Committee asked whether plans for a richer, longer average school week to ensure children enjoyed a rounded education, which were set out in the White Paper, were intended to improve extra curricula activities for children. The Committee also asked what impact the lengthened school week was expected to have on teachers and pay pressures, and the views of the teaching unions on the proposals. The

Assistant Director responded that the commitment in the White Paper was for every school to deliver a minimum of 32.5 hours of schooling and as most schools already delivered this, it was not expected to result in a change for the majority of schools, so it was not a concern that had been raised by teachers. The reference to a rounded education was believed to relate to plans for improved physical education and music curricula.

- **Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Support and inclusion** – the Committee sought assurance that it would be possible to ensure the new MAT system was inclusive and met the needs of all children, including those with SEND. The Assistant Director responded that part of the White Paper was working to clarify standards and expectations of strong MATs, particularly with regards to inclusion. There was a clear expectation in DfE policy that all schools would be inclusive and meet the needs of all children and this particularly came through in the recent Green Paper on reforms to the SEND system. The Assistant Director offered to discuss how the Green Paper reforms would support inclusion in all schools in more detail with members of the Committee at another time if helpful.
- **Impact of academisation policy on the local authority** – the Committee asked for further information on the anticipated timeline for migration of all schools to MATs and what the impact of the migration was expected to be on local authority services. The Assistant Director responded that the implementation timeline was very challenging and the Council had limited control over the pace at which it was delivered. The Council was therefore working hard to have an open dialogue with schools to understand their plans and intentions to ensure this was well-supported. The Director noted that the DfE acknowledged that local authorities did not have the capacity to support academisation at the rate the DfE would like, and knew this presented a challenge.

In terms of services, the Director explained that the Council already sold services (such as finance, HR, payroll, educational psychology and English as an Additional Language) to academies successfully and would look to continue this by ensuring that our service offers remained viable, strong and attractive to academies. Officers were considering the impact of academisation and how the service offer could be maintained for all schools longer-term, including once they became academies. The Committee asked a follow-up question to confirm it had been understood correctly that the Council did not have concerns about loss of traded service income because the Authority expected to be able to maintain viable income from schools regardless of whether they were maintained schools or academies. The Director confirmed that the intention was to continue delivering services to schools through the period of transition to MATs, and that the Department was largely confident, based on income already received from academies, that this was possible, but the viability of all services was kept under close review.

- **Education Investment Area status** – the Committee welcomed the recognition of Hastings as a priority EIA and asked if the county had EIA status because of challenges with educational attainment in Hastings. The Director and Lead Member for Education and ISEND confirmed EIA status was due to both challenges with attainment in Hastings and in other part of the county.
- **MAT performance** – the Committee asked for further information on the difference in performance between schools in MATs and local authority maintained schools. The Assistant Director responded that the difference in performance was a mixed picture nationally. In East Sussex, it was really challenging to analyse whether performance was linked to school status as many other factors had to be taken into account, including previous school performance, location, deprivation and proportion of children with SEND. The Director and Lead Member noted that many of the schools with challenges with

attainment in the county were academies so academisation alone did not necessarily improve educational outcomes.

- **Alternative Provision** – the Committee asked for further information on what the plans for full academisation meant for alternative provision. The Assistant Director responded that alternative provision in East Sussex was delivered by College Central as part of the Sabden MAT. The Department was, as part of its work to reduce exclusions, reviewing this alternative provision offer to ensure there was a good offer for children in all parts of the county and that the offer was focussed on shorter interventions and supporting children back into mainstream school wherever possible.
- **Plans for Local Authority Established Trusts** – the Committee asked for further information on the Council's position with regards to establishing Local Authority Established Trusts. The Director responded that the Department had not ruled this option out and it would continue to be considered by the Department as the policy was rolled out nationally. The starting position of the Department, however, was that it was very important that the Council could exercise its challenge role on inclusion for all schools and all MATs and that it was seen to be doing this impartially. The Director felt that initially seeking to have strong non-local authority-established MATs operating in the county left ESCC with a very clear, impartial role on challenge and advocating for children. At the same time, the Department would not rule out establishing a Trust on principle if it was clear this would be the best and fastest way to improve educational outcomes for children.

5.3 The Committee RESOLVED to request another update on progress with implementing the White Paper reforms in a year.

6. RECONCILING POLICY, PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES (RPPR)

6.1 The Director of Children's Services introduced the report which marked the start of the Committee's input into the 2022/23 RPPR Cycle and provided a stock take of the Council's position for scrutiny's consideration ahead of more detailed planning for the 2023/24 financial year. The report contained as appendices relevant parts of the Council's Year-End Monitoring Report which highlighted achievements and challenges for services the Committee scrutinised and the State of the County report which looked ahead at demographic, financial and policy trends and challenges. The Director highlighted that the Council was operating in a highly uncertain context due to COVID, developments in the national economic environment and significant reforms to services being brought forward by Government. The reform that generated the greatest uncertainty for the Council was planned in Adult Social Care, but there were also reforms planned in Children's Services which would introduce significant change to the way services were delivered. The Director highlighted that the report offered the Committee the opportunity to consider if further information, or scrutiny, was required on areas covered in both the appended reports, and that the Committee's views were sought on the principles for assessing one-off investment proposals set out at paragraph 1.6 of the report.

6.2 The Committee asked a number of questions regarding the information provided in the report:

- **Impact of Adult Social Care reforms** – the Committee asked how the findings of the fair cost of care exercise would impact the Council's budget in future years and future care quality (i.e. would we expect care quality to improve as a result of paying higher fee rates to providers). The Assistant Director for Strategy, Commissioning and Supply Management confirmed that the fair cost of care exercise was live and clarified that it only applied to

residential and nursing care for people aged sixty-five and over, and people receiving domiciliary care aged eighteen and over, so a range of other social care provision was excluded from the assessment (for example, working-age residential care). Determining the budgetary impact was partially reliant on understanding the funding that would be allocated by Government to support the reforms and next year's funding allocation was expected just before Christmas. The Department was required to submit two versions of a market sustainability plan, one in October this year publishing the outcome of the fair cost of care exercise and a subsequent plan in February 2023, describing how ESCC would move towards paying the fair cost of care over the subsequent two to three years. The gap between current fee rates and the rates identified by the fair cost of care exercise would be the financial challenge the Council would need to address. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that the assumed cost of the reforms for the Medium Term Financial Plan was currently net nil, because both the impact of the reform was unclear and the funding allocated had only been set out nationally in headline terms. There was yet to be a national consultation on funding methodology and while national research had identified a gap between funding Government had allocated and the projected costs of implementing reforms, ESCC's assumption was that reforms would be funded by Government as a 'new burden.' That may change as more detail on the local impact of reforms and our funding allocation was made available.

In terms of quality, the Assistant Director explained that the link between care cost and care quality was interesting and complex. A range of factors informed the cost of care provision, with charges levied for provision of nursing and/or personal care and other costs relating to elements such as the size of a room or view from a room in residential care settings. It was often the latter factors that influenced perceptions of care quality, and other matters such as interactions with staff, rather than the provision of nursing and personal care which would be provided in line with Care Quality Commission requirements and therefore not vary greatly across settings. The way that care providers structured their finances also differed greatly across the market, with larger national providers assessing costs differently to smaller businesses running a single, local care home, for example, and it was anticipated that the fair cost of care exercise would identify some of those differences.

- **Inflation** – the Committee asked how the Council would quantify the cost of rising inflation and account for it in budget planning. The Chief Finance Officer outlined that pay inflation was set at 2.5% in this financial year. Any increase in the pay award in-year would be met from reserves but that would have an impact on future years of the Medium Term Financial Plan and need to be modelled in. The Council calculated inflation using a range of indices, including data from the Office for Budget Responsibility, rather than a single, simple inflation rate. The Chief Finance Officer explained that the impact of inflation was complicated to account for because some contracts had fixed costs and a few years remaining on them, so the impact of inflation on costs for those contracts would be felt at different times in the coming years.
- **Inflation impact on care homes** – the Committee noted recent media reports that some care homes were struggling with increased costs from inflation; and asked what the response to any care home closures as a result of rising costs in East Sussex would be. The Assistant Director for Strategy, Commissioning and Supply Management responded that the Department knew care homes were having to manage significant additional costs from factors such as rising energy bills and rising cost of insurance coming out of the pandemic. National bodies such as the Local Government Association and Registered Care Association were lobbying to ensure pressures facing care homes were recognised. There had been a steady number of care home closures in East Sussex in the last five years, largely due to there being a number of small providers that had decided to retire. There were concerns that further closures would be seen in future as a result of rising costs so the

Department were having conversations with the local market, but the Assistant Director emphasised that developing sustainability plans was very challenging. There was a lot of focus nationally on the fair cost of care exercise discussed above, and the rate at which ESCC and other councils could move towards that fair cost would be dependent on the grant funding received from Government.

- **School improvement grant** – The Committee asked how the Council was responding to the 50% reduction in the School Improvement Monitoring and Brokering Grant in 2022/23. The Assistant Director Education explained that the Department had anticipated the reduction in the School Improvement Grant, which would cease entirely in April 2023, for some time and had built reduction of the Grant into budget and service planning in response to avoid a cliff-edge in provision. The Grant was part of, but not all of the resource, the Department used for school improvement; although it was fair to say that overall resource available for school improvement had reduced significantly over a number of years. The Department were looking at how staffing was arranged across the education division to manage the loss of the Grant, maintain an improvement function and ensure that the Department was able to respond to new requirements, such as those set out in new attendance guidance discussed in the previous item. This was challenging but the Assistant Director felt it was possible to do. The focus in recent years had been on building a school-to-school partnership approach to school improvement to maintain capacity, and the Department would also look to discuss de-delegated funding to support school improvement activity following the loss of the Grant with the Schools Forum in the new academic year.
- **Multiply Programme** – The Committee asked if a target group had been identified for the use of Multiply adult numeracy funding and what the role of schools would be in delivering that. The Director of Children’s Services responded that the Skills Team had developed plans for the funding and it would focus primarily on vulnerable adults, particularly those for whom this training could be a stepping stone to employment, as well as some staff employed by ESCC who were on lower pay grades and could benefit from additional numeracy training. Further Education colleges would be more involved in delivering the training than schools.

Principles for assessing one-off investment proposals

6.3 The Committee discussed and commented on the principles for assessing the proposals to be brought forward for use of £5.175m one-off funding held in reserves at the 2022/23 budget for investment.

6.4 The discussion covered the following comments:

- the first principle of ‘enabling a significant improvement in delivering to the Council’s priorities and/or performance targets’ should be the overriding priority from which the rest followed, as the other principles could all be seen as the means to deliver that first principle;
- out of the remaining principles, the next priority should be ‘proactively addressing known future issues’ as the operating landscape for the Council and services covered by the Committee had changed significantly since the 2022/23 budget was set and generated future challenges the Council should prepare for;
- the importance of investments improving performance and outcomes was noted by the Committee. When investment was made to improve delivery of performance targets the importance of the Council’s performance targets being the right ones to assess progress was also noted;
- in response to concerns that the principles of ‘managing service demands’ and ‘avoiding future costs’ indicated the potential for future cuts to budgets and services, the Director of

Children's Services clarified that these principles were describing ways of assessing 'invest to save' proposals, to invest in measures that would create a 'virtuous cycle' of reduced demand and costs, rather than making service or budget reductions;

- that the criteria were broad, could be clearer and could be more ambitious. The Director of Children's Services responded that it was recognised that the principles to assess investment proposals against were broad at this stage and this was one reason Cabinet had asked for scrutiny's input on them, to assist with narrowing down and prioritising the focus (for example, with views on whether to prioritise budgets or service improvements). The Lead Member for Adult Social Care assured the Committee that the one-off investments would be ambitious and focussed to achieve tangible outcomes, as had been seen with previous focussed one-off spending plans;
- in light of the request for views on prioritising the focus, the Committee suggested that as community safety and safety of children and adults was a priority focus of the Committee, that investments that deliver on 'keeping people safe' should be prioritised; and
- the option of adopting a principle or overarching theme to ensure that investments deliver a 'wellbeing economy,' which would cover areas such as community safety and addressing future issues like climate change.

6.5 The Committee asked what the timeline for agreeing the one-off investments was. The Chief Finance Officer responded that the ambition was to have one-off investments resolved by the autumn. Sharing the principles with the Committee for comment and ideas was part of the process that would feed into Cabinet making a decision on investments in the autumn. Given the short timeframe, it was noted the Committee would welcome an opportunity to consider the process in further detail at their work planning awayday.

Areas for future scrutiny

6.6 The Chair asked the Committee if there were areas covered in the report that could benefit from further scrutiny. It was agreed that the Committee would find it helpful for officers to notify the Committee, as planning progressed in future months, of areas they would welcome input on or would suggest People Scrutiny Committee prioritise.

6.7 The Chair suggested that areas requiring future scrutiny were also discussed at the Committee's work planning awayday in September and asked that the Committee notify the Chair of any areas they particularly wished to discuss at the awayday.

RPPR Board

6.8 The Committee RESOLVED to establish an RPPR Board to meet in December to consider the developing financial position for 2023/24 and draft Portfolio Plans, and agree detailed comments on those to be put to Cabinet. The Committee agreed the Membership of the RPPR Board would be the whole Committee.

7. WORK PROGRAMME

7.1 The Chair introduced the report on the Committee's latest work programme and noted that three initial scoping board had taken place since the Committee had last met in March.

Scrutiny Reviews

Equality and Inclusion in Adult Social Care

7.2 Councillor John Ungar, as Chair of the Initial Scoping Board, fed back that the Board had received an interesting presentation from the Department on the work they were undertaking to improve equality and inclusion; and had been impressed with the level of work underway. However, the Board had agreed there was a benefit to undertaking further scrutiny of the work needed to identify and engage with hard to reach groups and ensure that they, and other residents, knew how to access ASC services.

7.3 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the recommendation of the scoping board to proceed with a review of Adult Social Care Equality and Inclusion and to appoint Councillor John Ungar as Chair, and Councillor Nuala Geary to the Review Board. [Post-meeting note: Councillor Trevor Webb was also appointed to the Review Board].

Use of digital and technology in Adult Social Care

7.4 Councillor Penny di Cara, as Chair of the Initial Scoping Board, fed back that the Board had also been impressed with the amount of work being done by the Department to make use of digital and technological enhancements in ASC. The Board had worked to focus the topic down to look at a specific area of this work that was manageable and had agreed to focus on the cultural and behavioural changes needed to support increased use of online services and digital platforms.

7.5 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the recommendation of the scoping board to proceed with a review of Use of Digital and Technology in Adult Social Care and to appoint Councillor Penny di Cara as Chair, and Councillors Nuala Geary and Wendy Maples to the Review Board.

Use of Prevention in Children's Services

7.6 Councillor Johanna Howell, as Chair of the Initial Scoping Board, fed back that the Board had discussed a range of issues with officers at their scoping board, such as ways to deliver preventative approaches in rural areas and support families with financial pressures given the current economic context, and agreed they should proceed with a review of work underway to strengthen preventative approaches.

7.7 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the recommendation of the scoping board to proceed with a review of the Use of Prevention in Children's Services and to appoint Councillor Johanna Howell as Chair, and Councillors Sam Adeniji, Kathryn Field and John Hayling (Parent Governor Representative) to the Review Board.

Work Programme

7.8 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the updated work programme.

8. HANDLING AND LEARNING FROM COMPLAINTS, ENQUIRIES AND FEEDBACK

8.1 The Strategic Lead: Inclusion and Support Services introduced the report and delivered a short presentation on the key points and insights from the report. This covered:

- the range of mechanisms the Department have to inform their understanding of people's experience of ASC & Health – including through enquiries from MPs and councillors, which were a valuable source of information;
- the complaints process, which was a statutory process, and how it related to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman;

- numbers of complaints received in recent years – ASC consistently had the highest number of complaints across Council which was due to the number of services delivered to residents, often at very challenging points in their lives, under difficult circumstances. There was a dip in complaints in 2020/21 due to deferral of the complaints process while responding to the first wave of the pandemic;
- complaints numbers in 2021/22 had not reached pre-pandemic levels but there had been an increase in complexity. If complaints were not upheld, changes could still be made in response to concerns and feelings of dissatisfaction. The Strategic Lead explained that the presentation slides had a higher number of compliments in 2021/22 that had been covered in the report as the Department had re-counted compliments and found them to be higher;
- how complaints and other sources of information are monitored and analysed; and
- how the Department had used information from compliments and complaints (which often overlapped in their subject) to develop an understanding of what people value from ASC services.

8.2 Following the presentation, the Committee discussed and asked questions about the presentation and report. These covered:

- **Complaints figures** – the Committee asked whether the complaints figures cited in the report and as part of the presentation were complaints from individuals or numbers of overall complaints (including repeat complaints about one issue). The Strategic Lead confirmed that the figures would include both a single complaint from one individual and multiple complaints made by one person, but if multiple complaints by one person repeatedly covered the same issue, it would be recorded as only one complaint.
- **Language use** – the Committee observed that the language used by the Council in some written communications with residents could be improved and personalised, and discussed with officers how this could be achieved. The Strategic Lead: Inclusion and Support Services recognised the importance of language in communications when dealing with residents' concerns and complaints and noted that the Department had worked hard to ensure the language it used was as simple and jargon-free as possible, and used the sort of language officers would want to see in a response to themselves. The Director of Children's Services added that there was a lot of emphasis in Children's Services on responding to people with empathy and using a high degree of emotional literacy, recognising the people contacted the Council because they wanted their needs to be met and if we could not help them, that needed to be explained carefully.
- **Contact with the Council** – the Committee also fed back concerns they heard from residents that they were not always able to contact the services or officers they wanted to. The importance of having an accessible system, open phone-lines and up-to-date out of office messages was noted, as well as recognition that sometimes, people with a problem wanted to be able to speak to a person about it. The Strategic Lead agreed that responsiveness and the way the Council responded when residents tried to contact us was a key issue seen in complaints and the Department knew it was an area of pressure at present.
- **Complexity of complaints** – the Committee asked if the increasing complexity of complaints cited in the presentation was due to people leading more complex lives or was due to the services and processes they interacted with being more complex. The Strategic Lead responded that there was an element of both. Sometimes the complexity related to the involvement of family members and family disputes, including in situations where people the Council provided support to had full mental capacity and wanted to do one thing, while family members wanted them to do something else, which could be challenging to navigate.

At the same time, the pathways into the Department for accessing services were very diverse and it was also recognised that the eligibility criteria for accessing services was high which meant seeing people at higher levels of, and with unpredictable, need. When this combined with issues around safeguarding, and other factors such as deprivation, it could become a really difficult situation to navigate.

The Committee asked as a follow-up question how councillors could best help residents navigate complex services and systems to access support. The Strategic Lead responded that it was best to point residents to guidance from the Department and that Health and Social Care Connect could support with signposting and talking through services available. There are also other providers such as Care for the Carers and Age Concern who were familiar with processes and could provide support and guidance with navigating them.

- **Response time** – the Committee observed that often residents were contacting the Council with a complaint when they were frustrated, and having to wait twenty working days for a response could exacerbate that. The Committee asked whether there was scope to reduce that, what the average response time was and whether there was an agreed intended response time for follow-up complaints. The Strategic Lead acknowledged that every complaint was important to the person that had made it and twenty working days could feel like a long time for a response. While the Department worked to resolve complaints as quickly as possible, it was also important to ensure the issue was explored and understood thoroughly so that it could be responded to accurately. There was therefore often limited scope to reduce the response time without risking an unhelpful or inaccurate response. The Strategic Lead explained that average response times were reported in the Department's annual report on complaints and these had reduced from average response times of previous years. It was also noted that sometimes complaints could be responded to well within twenty working days, for example, if there was an issue that needed to be looked at immediately it would be referred to the Team responsible for consideration. In terms of the ambition for follow-up complaints or questions, if people had follow-up questions to their response, the Department would respond to those as soon as possible. The Assistant Director for Strategy, Commissioning and Supply Management added that the Department appreciated the situation could be frustrating for residents but the Department also needed to manage expectations and would not want to reduce the intended response time and then not be able to meet it.
- **Unreasonable complaints** – the Committee asked if there was a stage at which the Council would close a complaint because the same complaint had been submitted numerous times. The Strategic Lead responded that the Council had an Unreasonable Customer Behaviour Policy which would be applied in situations where people were not accepting a response. These could be challenging situations to manage and the key was applying the policy well and fairly, and giving people fair notice that their behaviour was becoming unreasonable.

8.3 The Chair thanked the Strategic Lead for the presentation.

The meeting ended at 4.04 pm.

Councillor Johanna Howell (Chair)