

PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, Lewes on 15 July 2024.

PRESENT Councillors Johanna Howell (Chair), John Ungar (Vice Chair), Colin Belsey, Charles Clark, Anne Cross, Kathryn Field, Nuala Geary, Peter Pragnell, Stephen Shing, Colin Swansborough, Trevor Webb and John Hayling (Parent Governor Representative). Trevor Cristin, (Diocesan Representative) joined remotely.

LEAD MEMBERS Councillor Bob Bowdler, Lead Member for Children and Families
Councillor Bob Standley, Lead Member for Education and Inclusion,
Special Educational Needs and Disability (ISEND) joined the meeting
remotely.

ALSO PRESENT Sally Carnie, Head of Looked After Children Services
Carolyn Fair, Director of Children's Services
Ian Gutsell, Chief Finance Officer
Jacqueline London-Willis, Head of Business Development and Insight
Sarah Russell, Assistant Director for Planning, Performance &
Engagement
Kaveri Sharma, Strategic Commissioner (Equality and Inclusion)
Mark Stainton, Director of Adult Social Care and Health
Rachel Sweeney, Senior Policy and Scrutiny Adviser

1. Minutes of the previous meeting

1.1 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the minutes of the meeting held on 11 March 2024 as a correct record.

2. Apologies for absence

2.1 The Chair confirmed the change to the Committee membership since the March meeting and thanked Councillors Adeniji and di Cara for their work and welcomed Councillors Besley and Pragnell. The Chair also thanked Trevor Cristin for his contribution to the People Committee as the Diocese of Chichester Representative.

2.2 Apologies for absence were received from Maria Cowler.

3. Disclosures of interests

3.1 There were no disclosures of interest.

4. Urgent items

4.1 There were no urgent items.

5. Children's Services work with IMPOWER

5.1 The Head of Looked After Children Services introduced a report on Children's Services Department's (CSD) work with IMPOWER consultants. The Committee heard that from May

2023 to January 2024, IMPOWER focused on placement sufficiency, ensuring that the right children were in care, in the right care placements, for the right length of time.

5.2 The Head of Looked After Children Services outlined key areas in the report, including analysis of children's needs and placement costs within East Sussex; the introduction of the Valuing Care Approach; development of the fostering service; and Enhanced Market Management and Commissioning, including East Sussex County Council's (ESCC) role in a South East pathfinder project to pilot Regional Commissioning Co-operatives. The report included findings from an initial financial assessment which showed identified achievable savings of £1.7m by the end of 2024/25, and a further £.19m by 2025/26.

5.3 The Committee welcomed the report and noted the initial successes of achieving both financial savings and producing better outcomes for children. The Committee discussed the following:

- **Recruitment of foster carers** – The Committee discussed methods of recruiting foster carers and emphasised the importance of raising the profile of in house fostering. The Head of Looked After Children's Services noted that this had been a focus of IMPOWER's work, including evidence based approaches developed from national data and examples of best practice in other local authorities which had resulted in an increase in quarter 1 of both foster carer applications and foster carers. The Committee sought clarification on the number of foster carer applications and approvals outlined in the report and heard that for quarter 1 in 2024, the Department had received 69 enquiries compared with 47 in the previous year; 20 initial visits compared with 12 the previous year; and eight approvals compared with three the previous year. The Committee welcomed the positive outcomes from work with IMPOWER to recruit more foster carers and commented that higher numbers of internal foster carers would reduce the need for external agencies and reduce council costs. The Lead Member for Children and Families emphasised the financial benefits of recruiting foster carers and noted that he would welcome opportunities for ESCC to work with the Foster Carers Association.
- **Training and support for foster carers** – The Committee enquired about the application process for foster carers, as well subsequent training and support, and noted a concern about some applicants not feeling supported to continue the process. The Committee also noted the positive feedback they had received about the training and support offered. The Head of Looked After Children Services confirmed that the process to become a foster carer should take up to six months and noted that preparatory training included ensuring applicants were aware of the process and the impact and changes fostering would have to their lives, however it would be beneficial to follow up with anyone who felt unable to continue the process. Post approval, foster carers were offered extensive and ongoing training and was considered a strength for ESCC. The Director of CSD noted that the Department would keep reviewing its offer to foster carers.
- **Children's placements** – The Committee acknowledged the challenging financial landscape officers were working in to secure suitable children's placements and sought assurance that when children were moved their outcomes, as well as financial savings, were monitored. The Head of Looked After Children's Services informed the Committee that children's outcomes were monitored through a range of processes, including statutory processes. The Director of CSD emphasised that children were only moved when there was evidence that it would improve their outcomes.
- **Financial savings** – The Committee welcomed the identified savings and sought clarification that these had been included in the Council's financial planning. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that these had been included and future planning would continue to consider projected savings. The Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability (ISEND) and the Lead Member for Children and Families noted that IMPOWER had found fewer potential savings in ESCC than in other local authorities which provided reassurance that positive work to reduce costs was already underway.

- **Reunification support** – The Committee enquired about the support offered to families after reunification. In response the Head of Looked After Children’s Services informed the Committee of the range of ongoing support offered based on a detailed bespoke plan to support the needs of the child and their families after reunification, including support from social workers and connected coaches that included financial, practical and therapeutic support.

5.4 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report and request a further update in six months time to understand how outcomes were progressing.

6. Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources (RPPR)

6.1 The Director of Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) introduced the report which marked the start of the Committee’s input into the 2024/25 RPPR cycle and provided a stock take of the Council’s position for scrutiny’s consideration ahead of more detailed planning for the 2025/26 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 informed the Committee that the Council was in a period of significant financial challenge, with ongoing pressures impacting on demand led services, and emphasised the important role of scrutiny in the RPPR process, including its input at the upcoming Committee awayday and the December RPPR Board which would consider any savings proposals and the impact of these on service delivery and outcomes, as well as financial implications.

6.2 The Director of ASCH highlighted the key issues in ASCH, including the Department overspend for 2023/2024 and pressure on the Community Care budget due to an increase in complexity of need; increased pressures on NHS services; an increase in people aged over 65 in the county, and an increase in people aged over 85 who were more likely to need care and support; and increased levels of unsecured debt with people struggling to pay for contributions to their care.

6.3 The Director outlined the key priorities for ASCH in the 2024 State of the County report, including continuing to implement the Adult Social Care Strategy *What Matters to You*; developing a new prevention strategy; continuing multi agency work on financial inclusion; and working with the NHS to deliver the integrated care strategy and shared delivery plan, including the formation of Integrated Community Teams. The Department was also continuing to prepare for an upcoming Care Quality Commission assessment and responding to findings by the Local Government Association Peer Review undertaken in February 2024. Preparation for this visit, and subsequent findings, had identified key priority areas for the Department: prevention; waiting times; safeguarding; quality; and value for money.

6.4 The Director of CSD highlighted the key issues in Children’s Services, including an overspend in 2023/24 due to increased demand for and increased costs of children’s care placements; Home to School Transport; and the increased number of children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Although these challenges reflected national increases in demand and costs, the Department was responding locally by targeting early support to families, including through connected coaches and family practitioners, and was starting to see positive outcomes with reductions in the number of children on Child Protection Plans. The Department had increased in-house foster carers and had worked regionally to manage market challenges through a regional care cooperative. To address pressures on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support, the Department was continuing to work with schools to identify and support children with maintained provision in the county. The Director highlighted the challenges with attainment in East Sussex and informed the Committee of targeted support to schools in Hastings and Bexhill to improve outcomes. In response to

increases in demand across all areas, the Department was working with partners in the community, and with ASCH, to ensure families were provided with the right offer.

6.5 The Director outlined the key priorities for CSD going forward in the 2024 State of the County report, including continuing to respond to increased demand and complexity across children's care and SEND support; responding to national policies, such as Stable Homes Built on Love, as well as expected changes to SEND support and Home to School Transport; developing the safeguarding approach; and building on the success of Family Hubs.

6.6 The Chief Finance Officer outlined the key financial outlook in the report which set out a stark financial position, with appendix 2 showing a revenue overspend of £30m due to significant pressures in ASCH and CSD. The updated Medium-Term Financial Plan showed an increased deficit by 2027/28 of £83m, and current unallocated reserves at £16m. The Chief Finance Officer noted uncertainties in planning with a new government but emphasised the financial situation was unsustainable and the deficit meant the budget was in an unbalanced position for 2025/26; work therefore was underway with officers to seek opportunities to reduce the deficit.

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

- **Home to School Transport** – The Committee enquired about work underway to seek savings in Home to School Transport, including the possibility of using the Council Flexibus service, and where appropriate, families making their own arrangements despite national requirements for the local authority to do so. The Director of CSD informed the Committee that Home to School Transport was being reviewed, including looking at route optimisation, the number of single journeys, use of personal transport budgets, and eligibility. The Lead Member for Education and ISEND agreed that this was an important issue to review, but noted the priority was to ensure the needs of children were appropriately met.
- **Lobbying** – The Committee discussed lobbying opportunities with a new government, including through the County Council Network, on local challenges such as areas of deprivation and areas with low employment in the county.
- **Support for Carers** – The Committee enquired about the drop in carer referrals to the short-term crisis intervention outlined in the quarter 4 monitoring report and asked if recent national issues with payments to carers was having an impact on carers seeking support. The Director of ASCH emphasised that the report outlined performance for the crisis intervention service which was targeted to carers in crisis such as a health issue, however the Department was working with carers to understand if the drop in referrals was due to improvements to people's situations or carers needing a different type of support. The Department was also developing a prevention strategy which aimed to raise awareness of support services. The Director clarified that the Government provided carer's allowance, but that officers did signpost carers to this support.
- **Care placement costs** – The Committee sought clarification on local authority and NHS funding for children's and adult's care where there were health related needs, in particular for high cost placements. The Director of CSD informed the Committee that young people often presented with social and mental health difficulties and challenging behaviours which meant they needed more costly care and noted that greater contributions from health partners to support these care packages would be welcome to improve outcomes for children and young people. There were ongoing discussions with partners on supporting children with complex needs with health funding. The Director also noted a reduction in Tier 4 beds across the county which had resulted in limited access to clinical residential support and that whilst social care would support children, there was a lack of clinical skills required to meet some children's needs. The Director of ASCH noted increased high cost placements within ASCH, partly due to children with complex needs often needing ongoing, and sometimes intensive support once they became adults. The Director detailed the NHS funding frameworks to support health

needs and noted the ongoing work with the NHS to ensure eligible individuals received appropriate funding and to develop opportunities for joint funding for adults who did not meet Continuing Health Care eligibility criteria but still presented with complex needs.

- **Prevention** – The Committee enquired about ways people could be supported to avoid the need for care, including with changes to policy. The Director of ASCH informed the Committee of the Council's priority to prevent, reduce or delay the need for care and noted that the Department was working on a strengths based approach to identify and meet people's needs and develop their abilities, including support provided by friends and family and community assets to avoid funded services and promote people's independence.
- **ASCH funding** – The Committee discussed the current model for ASCH funding and noted that locally there were increased demands due to a higher number than average of older people in the county which funding should reflect. The Director of ASCH emphasised the increase in demand seen in referrals, assessments and safeguarding enquiries and noted the delays to national funding reforms to social care, which had been due to be implemented in 2025, and was awaiting developments.
- **SEND** – The Committee asked about the increases in the number of children requiring SEND support. The Director of CSD informed the Committee that this was a national trend in response to lowering the threshold for EHCPs in 2014, and increases in complexity of need since COVID, which had exasperated the needs of children who were neuro diverse and those with social and mental health needs. Whilst East Sussex had lower numbers than other areas of the country, it was expected that these would increase which would put pressure on services including Home to School Transport. The Committee commented that increases in complex needs would require high cost support which only limited providers would be able to offer.

6.8 The Committee RESOLVED to establish an RPPR Board to meet in December to consider the developing financial position for 2025/26 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.

6.9 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report.

7. Work programme

7.1 The Chair introduced the report which outlined the Committee's latest work programme.

School Attendance Review

7.2 The Chair informed the Committee that the School Attendance Scoping Board had met and recommended that due to key work in this area progressing at pace, the issue would be better considered by the Committee through a Reference Group.

7.3 The Committee RESOLVED to convert the School Attendance Scrutiny Review to a Reference Group.

Forward plan

7.4 The Committee reviewed the Council's Forward Plan of executive decisions.

Work Programme

7.5 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the updated work programme.

8. Scrutiny Review of Equality and Inclusion in Adult Social Care and Health

8.1 The Vice Chair introduced the item and reminded the Committee that the Equality and Inclusion in ASCH Scrutiny Review had looked at the Department's engagement with seldom

heard groups and noted the ongoing work in this area and welcomed the report which showed progress on the Review's recommendations.

8.2 The Strategic Commissioner (Equality and Inclusion) introduced the report which provided an update on the implementation of the recommendations of the Review.

8.3 The Strategic Commissioner noted work with health and system partners to understand and raise awareness of barriers people faced when accessing services and the need to include seldom heard communities. Work on engagement and consultation had also developed with a review of membership of forums to ensure these were inclusive. The Strategic Commissioner informed the Committee that recommendations from the Review had been incorporated into the new Equality and Inclusion Strategy and action plan which detailed how work would be embedded across the Department and assured the Committee that this work would continue to develop.

8.4 The Committee welcomed the report and discussed the following:

- **Work with homeless people** – The Committee welcomed progress in this area, in particular, work to raise awareness of and increase referrals to ASCH services from health professionals working with homeless people.
- **Care experience as a protected characteristic** – The Committee sought clarification on progress to include care experience as a protected characteristic within the Council. The Assistant Director for Planning, Performance & Engagement informed the Committee that this had been discussed in corporate boards in order to understand the impacts of this across the Council and noted that more information on the progress of this could be provided after the meeting.
- **Work with gypsy and traveller communities** – The Committee enquired about recommendations related to work with gypsy and traveller communities which were currently rated as amber. The Strategic Commissioner informed the Committee that work was progressing but that it took time to develop connections with these communities; the Department was working with trusted partners to achieve this.
- **Languages** – The Committee enquired about the list of languages in the Equality and Inclusion Strategy available for translation and noted this could cause concern locally if certain languages were not represented. The Strategic Commissioner clarified that these had been selected based on data on translation requests and that this was regularly reviewed. It was noted that this list did not fully reflect the number of languages spoken in East Sussex.

8.5 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the recommendations and to receive a further update report in six months time.

9. Scrutiny Review of Use of Digital and Technology in Adult Social Care and Health

9.1 The Head of Business Development and Insight introduced the report which provided an update on the implementation of the recommendations of the Use of Digital and Technology in Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Review.

9.2 The Head of Business Development and Insight informed the Committee that all actions on the plan had been completed, although noted that digital development work would remain an ongoing area of focus. The report showed that the Department had continued to see an increase of using online forms and a new robotic process for sending and recording letters had recently been implemented. The Department now held social care records digitally and had piloted the use of Sign Live to access live interpretation with positive feedback. The Department would continue to seek opportunities to use digital to deliver services including automation and artificial intelligence (AI), although noted that this was at an early stage.

9.3 The Committee welcomed the report and discussed the following:

- **Digital safety** – The Committee sought assurance on safety procedures for storing records digitally and asked how frequently data was backed up. In response the Head of Business Development and Insight told the Committee that digital safety was a priority across the Council; there was a robust process in place to ensure the Department met statutory requirements and a two factor authentication had been built in to protect personal data. The Head of Business Development and Insight noted that more information on the back up process, including frequency, could be provided after the meeting.
- **Digital inclusion** – The Committee asked if people had concerns about using online services for personal matters. The Head of Business Development and Insight noted there were still options to engage with services non digitally and that although uptake was increasing, this was still low compared with referrals by phone or in person. In a discussion on how people of different ages were responding to this, the Committee heard that generally younger people were more confident with digital tools and the Department was working to increase confidence across all ages. The Director of ASCH noted that as well as the skills to use digital tools, the Department was mindful of challenges with digital literacy and poverty which could impact people's engagement with digital services and was seeking to make these accessible.
- **Use of AI** – The Committee discussed the potential of digital and AI and a question was asked about impact of the digital offer against carbon targets. The Director of ASCH noted that the Council was in the early stages of looking at the potential advantages of using AI and the risks, including energy impacts, would be considered. The Council was taking a cautious approach, however, within the context of increased financial pressures, AI could improve efficiency.

9.4 The Committee agreed that although it was important to retain a human element in the delivery of services, the progress of digital and AI was fast paced and it was important the Council responded to this positively.

9.5 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report.

The meeting ended at 1.10 pm.

Councillor Johanna Howell (Chair)