

Report of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee on Family Support Services

Chairman: Cllr Leigh Redman

Division and Local Member: All

Lead Officer: Julian Gale – Strategic Manager – Governance and Risk

Author: Jamie Jackson – Governance Manager - Scrutiny

Contact Details: 01823 359040 jajackson@somerset.gov.uk

1. Summary

- 1.1. This report summarises the comments arising from the Scrutiny for Policies Children and Families Committee meeting on 26 January 2018 having considered the proposed changes to Early Help settings. These changes were first reported at our 28 July 2017 meeting. The initial proposals were to create 'early help hubs' in local communities, something that had been identified as a key priority in the Children and Young People's Plan 2016-2019. The proposed new 'hub service' would offer multi-agency integrated services to identify and support children and families who needed additional help and quick intervention.
- 1.2. Since our meeting last July we have continued to receive regular update reports about what is now described as Family Support Services. Firstly we were provided with an outline of the proposed consultation exercise and then most recently we received an overview of the responses received during that consultation exercise. It was clear that these proposed changes generated much interest in Somerset residents as over a 1,000 people participated and provided comments, with some coming to our meetings to ask questions.

2. Comments from the Committee

- 2.1. The Committee felt that clear and concise information would need to be shared with all staff and service users. Although the evidence from Officers and contained in reports indicated that the Services offered would be improved as 'universal services' would be co-located and other services would be better targeted to service users, it seemed as if the de-designation of some Children's Centres in 2014 had left a residual mistrust and lack of confidence in the Council.
- 2.2. We noted from the responses received that service users felt that changing the status of a Children's Centres would result in a reduction of available services and that this would mean that families would have to travel further to access services. Although Officers had stressed that a reduction in the number of buildings funded and maintained would not mean any reduction in the services available this did not appear to have been accepted or understood by a significant number of service users as evidenced in the consultation feedback.
- 2.3. Some Members of the Committee felt that there appeared to be little connection between the feedback obtained from the members of the public who participated in the consultation exercise and the proposals/responses proposed by the Council, more weight should have been placed on feedback from users. We noted that amongst those that had participated in the consultation that two thirds were members of the public and a third being people who identified as being users of the Family Support Service.

- 2.4.** The Committee also highlighted concerns raised during the consultation exercise regarding the status and qualifications of staff currently employed providing services, particularly Health professionals, and Members sought reassurance that the same appropriate skills/qualifications would be required for all staff when the changes proposed in Family Support Services were implemented?
- 2.5.** Members also noted that the increasing use of technology was referred to in the report as a means of helping to enhance the accessibility/offer of Family Support Services and concern was expressed that many residents in parts of Somerset did not have easy access to the internet and/or technology and if this would result in them being disadvantaged. It was also noted that enhanced/improved reliance on technology would also be very resource and staff intensive with information requiring maintaining and/or updating on websites etc. Officers explained that enhanced use of technology was intended to be an aid/complement to existing provisions, some Health Visitors used text messaging and Facebook was also a useful means of communicating.
- 2.6.** During the discussion the Committee also reflected that the consultation exercise had been restrictive inasmuch as there was no detail or explanation of any alternative provisions/options provided and this had led to a perception that the changes were not being 'user led' and that children and families were 'being done to, rather than doing' themselves.
- 2.7.** The Committee noted that following the public consultation exercise the recommendations were to proceed with the original proposals to change Family Support Services, changing the status of 16 Children's Centres, co-locating more staff and extend outreach in local communities, and this had created the perception amongst members of the public that the decisions had already been taken. The Committee noted that Officers were keen to emphasise it was not about directing a one size fits all approach centrally but ensuring and encouraging local options/solutions were provided for the benefit of local communities as the Council worked with a variety of partners.
- 2.8.** The Committee questioned if a cost benefit type analysis had been conducted to help gauge the cost of the existing range of provision and what type of additional costs/savings might then arise from going ahead with the proposed changes, therefore a pre and post reconfiguration cost analysis, together with gauging the opportunity cost of reorganising services and how this might effect hard to reach communities. Some Members felt this was an important consideration as contained within the current recommendations was a 'further recommendation' to continue reviewing the provision of family centres in Minehead, Wellington, Chard and Yeovil. Members thought that this appeared to be sending mixed messages and might put hard to reach groups at a disadvantage.
- 2.9.** It was also noted that there didn't seem to be any joining up decisions within the Council as it was noted that as buildings closed and people needed to travel further to access services or attend meetings/support groups reductions in bus services continued. Members thought that this appeared to be sending mixed messages and might put hard to reach groups at a disadvantage.

- 2.10.** Regarding the second part of the proposed changes to bring Public Health Nursing Services into the Council to develop the new Family Support Service within the Council the Committee accepted this recommendation, in line with the reasons identified within the report. Members noted the concerns raised during public question time and asked that officers confirm that all staff had been fully engaged in the consultation process. In conclusion overall the Committee felt it important that as the changes progressed clear and concise information needed to be shared with all staff and service users with good communications providing reasonable notice of changes.

3. Background

The Scrutiny for Policies Children and Families Committee began considering the proposed changes to Early Help settings at our 28 July 2017 meeting. A report provided us with an update on the proposals to create 'early help hubs' in local communities, identified as a key priority in the Children and Young People's Plan 2016-2019. The report explained that the proposed 'hub service' would offer multi-agency integrated services to identify and support children and families who need additional help and quick intervention, and over time this would help reduce the gap in outcomes for those in deprived areas.

Since that meeting last summer we have continued to receive regular update reports about Family Support Services, firstly outlining the proposed consultation exercise and then most recently providing us with an overview of the responses received during the consultation exercise, during which over a 1,000 Somerset resident had participated and provided comments.

It was explained that the rationale for the proposed changes was:

- To achieve better outcomes for families; particularly engaging hard to reach families and reducing inequalities;
- Ensure that residents, children and young people, were given every opportunity to improve their life chances;
- To provide more effective, accessible services; reducing duplication and provide more community based support and guidance; and,
- To protect frontline services by reducing costs associated with buildings.

At our meeting on 26 January 2018 we were asked to consider and scrutinise the options appraisal and proposal to bring Public Health Nursing Services into Somerset County Council (SCC) to develop the new Family Support Service within the Council. Option 1: would see development of an Integrated Family Support Service delivered by the Council. This option would require bringing Public Health Nursing Services into the Council and integrating this and also the current 'GetSet' Services into the newly arranged Family Support Service. Option 2: would see development of an Integrated Family Support Service through an external provider, having been procured after a competitive OJEU compliant competitive process.

We noted after an appraisal process that analysed both options that Option 1 had a higher score and it was seen as more favourable to:

- Establish greater links with related children and family services e.g. Children's Social Care and Support Services for Education;
- Help to understand the needs of children, families & communities;
- Become part of wider work across the Council to support community development and greater working with the voluntary and community sector;
- Enable public health specialist work, such as health promotion, needs assessment and local policy development, to be influenced and supported by public health practitioners;
- Promote opportunity for professional development and a more structured career pathway for staff.

4. Consultations undertaken

- 4.1.** The Committee invites all Councillors to attend and contribute to its meetings. The Committee Chair and Vice Chair invite prospective report authors to attend

their pre-meetings and recently Lead Officers have engaged in this process and reports have been submitted on time.

5. Implications

- 5.1.** The Committee carefully considers reports, and often asks for further information about the implications as outlined in the reports considered at its meetings. For further details of the reports considered by the Committee please contact the author of this report.

6. Background papers

- 6.1.** Further information about the Committee including dates of meetings in the new quadrennium, and agendas & reports from previous meetings are available via the Council's website.

www.somerset.gov.uk/agendasandpapers

Note: For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author.