

Report of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee

Chairman: Cllr Leigh Redman

Division and Local Member: All

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1. Summary

- 1.1. The Scrutiny for Policies Children and Families Committee is required by the Constitution to make an annual report to the Council and to provide each other meeting of the Council with a summary progress report and outcomes of scrutiny. This report covers the work of the Committee's meetings in December 2017 and January 2018. Our first meeting in January was a joint meeting with our sister Scrutiny Committee for Policies, Adults and Health.
- 1.2. The main focus of our work programme will be to ensure the continuous improvement and delivery of the 7 priorities contained within the Children and Young Peoples Plan (CYPP). In this endeavour the Chairman has again suggested that each Member of the Committee volunteer to act as a 'champion' for each of the 7 programmes.
- 1.3. Our predecessor Committee were pleased to see continuing progress in many areas of the Council's improvement agenda for children and young people and our central focus will also be to constantly ask - What impact does that have on children in Somerset?
- 1.4. The Committee has 9 elected Members. We also have 7 co-opted members. We have 2 Church representative vacancies along with 1 Parent Governor vacancies and we are looking at ways to ensure those positions are occupied. We have retained our Schools Compact representative and a representative from the Schools Forum; our co-opted members have voting rights on education matters only. We look forward to once again hearing first hand testimony from front line staff who will we invite to attend and participate at our meetings.
- 1.5. Members of the Council are reminded that:
 - all Members are invited to attend meetings of all the Council's Scrutiny Committees and to contribute freely on any agenda item;
 - any Member could propose a topic for inclusion on the Scrutiny Work Programmes;
 - any Member can be asked by the Committee to contribute information and evidence, and to participate in specific scrutiny reviews.

2. Background

2.1. Scrutiny Work Programme

As noted above the focus of our work programme will be the 7 priorities of the CYPP with practical work to support and challenge service improvement. The

Committee fully supported this at our first meeting of the quadrennium and we look forward to working with the Director of Children's Services (DCS) and other Officers to ensure topics dealt with during Scrutiny meetings support the improvement process.

Each of our future meetings will have specific agenda items to consider the work programme and this will allow members and officers to suggest items we should scrutinise in more depth. We are also very keen to enhance our ability to monitor our suggested outcomes and recommended actions to ensure these have been progressed, and to assist us in this we will continue to review our outcome tracker at every meeting to ensure this is meaningful.

2.2. 8 December 2017

Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)

Our first main agenda item was report that provided Members with a summary of progress made following a peer review of the Council carried out last May by Gloucestershire County Council, as part of the preparation for a Local Area Inspection of Special Educational Needs and Disability 0-25 (SEND 0-25) by OFSTED and the Care Quality Commission (CQC). We received a lengthy PowerPoint presentation from Officers in different areas that were involved in the delivery of the priority action plan including a former young person champion who was now a SEND Commissioning Officer. There was a thorough discussion of the progress being made and answers were provided to a number of questions. The report and presentation were accepted and the Chair expressed thanks on behalf of the Committee for the progress made so far. It was suggested and agreed that a further update be provided in the Spring.

Somerset Safeguarding Children's Board Annual Report

Our attention then turned to the Annual Report of the Somerset Safeguarding Children's Board (SSCB) that provided an overview on the effectiveness of child safeguarding and the promotion on the welfare of children in the local area. The Annual Report, a statutory requirement of the Children Act, offered of a transparent assessment of the performance and effectiveness of local services and identified where improvements were required. The report was introduced by Mrs Sally Halls, the Chair of the SSCB, who stated that the way the SSCB and its partners worked together to keep children safe in Somerset had improved over the past year. Many children and families were receiving more effective services, often at an earlier stage than previously. A DVD was shown which highlighted the outcomes of a Serious Case Review 'Operation Fenestra' which had focused upon a number of Somerset's children who had suffered serious harm as a result of being sexually exploited. Mrs Halls confirmed the SSCB did use learning from previous reviews and carried out audits to ascertain if recommendations had been embedded. Mrs Halls also noted that lots of problems discovered in other areas did not happen in Somerset. The SSCB was committed to developing improved multi-agency collaboration to progress that type of safeguarding work and to drive the strategy and action plan for the prevention of child sexual exploitation. We accepted the report.

Family Support Services

We then received a presentation to provide an overview of the headline figures from the recent public engagement exercise regarding the proposed changes to Family Support Services in Somerset. The next steps of the project were identified and it was noted there would be a workshop for those staff involved in the project/consultation to consider how the consultation feedback would affect the final proposals for main hub locations and associated impact assessments. In response to a question it was noted that Councillors although not invited to the workshop in December would be able to consider the draft proposals at the 26 January meeting of the Committee ahead of the Cabinet's meeting on 12 February 2018. We accepted the update.

Ofsted Inspection Update

Our final agenda item of 2017, perhaps appropriately, was an update from the Director of Children's Services (DCS) on the recent return visit of the Ofsted inspectors. Although the DCS noted the final report from the Inspectors would not be available until January, during their re-inspection of Somerset they had informally confirmed that significant progress made in improving services for vulnerable children. The Chair thanked the DCS for the update and also wished to record his and the Committee's thanks to all those Officers and others whose work across Somerset was making a real difference to the lives of children, young people and families. The update was accepted and the Chair closed the meeting wishing everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

2.3. 12 January 2018

Our first meeting of 2018 was a new experience for many Members as we held a Joint Meeting with the Scrutiny for Policies, Adults and Health Committee. Cllr Redman, Chair of the Joint Meeting reflected on the recent passing of Mr Campbell Main, Founder of Autism Somerset, who was a regular attendee at Scrutiny and Council meetings and would be missed.

Both Committees had chosen the theme of our joint meeting as focusing on 'mental health' and we began with an introductory overview on: Emotional Health & Well-Being needs for Children & Young People; and Commissioning Responsibilities with a discussion of the issues in each area.

Our attention was then drawn by colleagues in the Clinical Commissioning Group to: Transformation of Child and Adult Mental Health Service (CAMHS); and, Future in Mind – promoting, protecting and improving Children and Young People's Mental Health and Well-being. Both of these were very interesting and prompted a number of questions from members which were answered.

Officers from a variety of service areas then provided an overview of 4 specific areas and further information was relayed to us on: Perinatal & Infants; Schools – whole school; Children Looked After/Care Leavers; and, Transitions – Child to Adult Services, for Children with mental health needs. There was a wide ranging discussion and further information was requested on the numbers of those involved in Transitions from child to adult mental health services.

It was suggested and agreed that Councillors write letters in support of a funding application regarding Perinatal and Infants services and that Somerset MP's also be encouraged to support the request for additional resources.

2.4. 26 January 2018

Family Support Services

We began our second meeting of the month hearing questions and statements from members of the public regarding the proposed changes to Family Support Services. We agreed to move the order of our agenda items to consider Family Support Services first and the item comprised 2 reports; the first of which detailed the proposed development of the Family Support Service and was described as Phase 1. We 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. We held a thorough discussion that encompassed the consultation exercise and the Council's response to the public feedback, outlining our concerns of a number of areas including: the perception that an alteration to the status and a reduction of the number of children's centres; the apparent disparity between the public feedback obtained during the public consultation and the Council's responses to those comments; the qualifications/skills of health professional and if that would be diluted as a result of the proposed changes; the increasing use of technology as outlined in the report and we noted that many residents in parts of Somerset did not have easy access to the internet and/or technology and we were concerned if this would result in them being disadvantaged; the lack of alternative proposal/options in the consultation exercise had created a perception that the changes were not being 'user led' and that children and families were 'being done to, rather than doing' themselves; we noted that following the public consultation exercise the recommendations were to proceed with the original proposals and this had created the perception amongst members of the public that the decisions had already been taken and were pre-determined; we 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 expressed concern with accepting the proposals when there remained a 'further recommendation' to continue reviewing the provision of family centres in Minehead, Wellington, Chard and Yeovil.

Our attention then turned to what was described as Phase 2, regarding the proposed changes around Public Health Nursing Services and the new Family Support Service. We noted the outcomes of an analysis of the 2 options and this had concluded the preferred option was to bring Public Health Nursing Services into the Council to develop the new Family Support Service within the Council and the Committee accepted this recommendation, in line with the reasons identified within the report.

In conclusion overall the Committee felt it important that as the changes progressed for clear and concise information to be shared with all staff and service users and good communications would be vital.

Medium Term Financial Plan 2018/19

Our next agenda item was a report on the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan, including the 2018/19 Capital Investment Programme and the Director of Finance, Legal and Governance provided an overview of the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement and how this might affect the budgetary position. The main savings would therefore be targeted in: reducing the high cost of placements; making efficiencies in transport operations; reducing the levels of business support; and reviewing management levels in some areas of Children's Services.

Attention turned to the Capital Investment Programme and it was noted this included a number of investments relating to Children's Services budgets and for 2018/19 a significant investment in Schools. The funding of this investment would be subject to further announcements by government either in our final settlement or separately as the DfE and other government departments revealed capital allocations. The scale of the proposed Schools building and improvement programme was substantial but the level of DfE grant and other grants/contributions/income was not known so it remained unclear how much resource assistance the Council would receive towards its funding needs. The Director of Finance, Legal and Governance assured Members that he continued to make representations to the Department for Communities and Local Government following the consultations on the Fairer Funding Review last summer so that the Government recognised the pressures on Councils to meet the growing demand for its services with diminishing resources.

Fostering Services Update

Our final report provided an overview on the provision of Fostering Services in Somerset and further set out the statutory obligations, legal processes and tools used by Officers to ensure children in Somerset were looked after. We noted that the Somerset Sufficiency Statement for Children Looked After and Care Leavers 2016-19 was refreshed each year. The document analysed the sufficiency of placements available for children looked after, and highlighted actions the Council was taking to ensure there were enough placements to meet the needs of children looked after. The sufficiency statement outlined six challenges, which were addressed through an action plan which was reported to be progressing well. We asked some questions which the Officer undertook to investigate and provide us a response. We accepted the update and it was agreed to request a further update in 6 months.

3. Consultations undertaken

- 3.1. 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.

4. Implications

- 4.1. 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.

5. Background papers

- 5.1.** 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.