

# End of Quadrennium 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 each year and we were also asked to given consideration to producing a report to reflect on our first 2 years.. Our report to the next Full Council will be our second annual report since our first meeting in May 2015, following the Council’s enhanced focus on scrutiny of Children’s Services.
- 1.2. The main part of our work programme fully supported by the committee during our first 12 months was based on the nine cross cutting Somerset priorities that had been agreed by the Somerset Children’s Improvement Board. Our focus over the previous 12 months has been based on the seven cross cutting Somerset priorities that are the key themes in the Children and Young People’s Plan (CYPP). We have received an update on progress of the seven improvement programmes at our meetings and asked detailed questions of the Director of Children’s Services and his team.
- 1.3. Over this time we have been pleased to see significant progress in many areas of the improvement programme, including the reduction in average caseloads and increased senior management capacity in the service. We requested and received detailed breakdowns of the number of remaining vacancies for social workers and team managers and the use interim staff.
- 1.4. We had specific agenda items and discussions on:
  - Children’s Safeguarding;
  - Children Leaving Care;
  - Business Architecture and IT;
  - Addressing Drug and Alcohol Concerns in Families;
  - The CQC Review of Healthcare and Safeguarding; and
  - The Medium Term Financial Plan.
- 1.5. The Committee has 9 elected Members. We also have 7 co-opted members. There is currently 1 Church representative and 2 vacancies; we have a Parent Governor representative and one vacancy; we have a Schools Compact representative and a representative from the Schools Forum. All of these co-opted members have voting rights on education matters only.
- 1.6. Members of the Council are reminded that:
  - all Members have been invited to attend meetings of all 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.
- 1.7. Since our first meeting in May 2015 we have been pleased to see continuing progress in many areas of the Council's improvement agenda for children and young people and our central focus has remained to constantly ask and seek reassurance about - **What impact does that have on children in Somerset?** We would urge our successor Committee and its Members to retain focus on working towards ensuring the best outcomes for Children, Young People and Families in Somerset. We wish to place on record our thanks to those Officers, whom we have tried to support, for their on-going endeavour and hard work for the benefit of children and young people in Somerset.
2. **Recommendations/Items for consideration**  
 The Committee is asked to consider and comment on these suggested measures to help improve Scrutiny in the next quadrennium:
- Enhanced support for Scrutiny Members such as a Scrutiny Officer role;
  - More Scrutiny Committee and Member involvement and input before Cabinet decisions;
  - Scrutiny training be provided for the new Council after the May elections;
  - Encourage greater Member commitment and involvement as this is crucial to ensuring Scrutiny remains effective;
  - Lead Officer and Cabinet Member attendance at Scrutiny should continue as this is helpful;
  - Our outcome tracker be adopted by the other 2 Scrutiny Committee's to ensure all recommendations are actioned/followed up.

3.

3.1. **Scrutiny Work Programme**

The work programme has focussed on the nine improvement priorities and practical work to support and challenge service improvement. The committee fully support this and the nine priorities, the chairman & vice chairman have been working with the Director of Children's Services (DCS) to ensure topics dealt with during scrutiny support the improvement process. When considering reports and policy changes we are constantly assessing what impact does that have on the children of Somerset? We would encourage all Councillors to become more actively involved and aware of their corporate parent responsibilities.

Each of our meetings had specific agenda items to consider the work programme and allow members and officers to suggest items we should scrutinise in more depth. We are also reviewing and updating how we track and monitor our suggested outcomes and/or recommended actions so we can understand the impact of our work so we can learn how to better focus our scrutiny work to ensure we have made a difference. In addition to our monthly Committee meetings we have established task and finish group to consider aspects related to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and also Young Carers in Somerset and have found this more focused approached very worthwhile.

Scrutiny Members have endeavoured through the first two years of the Committee's meetings to make suggestions and express opinions to Commissioning/Service Directors and Cabinet Members after discussion and debate. The majority of these were accepted and incorporated either into the operations of the Council or the decisions of the Cabinet. The Committee wishes

to formally place on record its appreciation to those Cabinet Members that have attended our meetings. This has often proved to be helpful both for the Committee and also the Cabinet Member and Lead Officer. We have also been grateful for the benefit of first hand testimony having invited front line staff to attend and participate at our meetings. We are also grateful to those professionals that participated in our task and finish reviews (often at short notice) and we have greatly valued them sharing their frontline knowledge and experience.

We have also been mindful during the last two years to reflect the Council's overall corporate focus on improving outcomes for young people across Somerset and ensuring improvement is real and deliverable. In this regard we have purposely sought to create constructive relationships with our sister Scrutiny Committees (Policies and Place) and (Adults and Health) as we have endeavoured to take care in establishing our respective work programmes of future items to avoid duplication and therefore hopefully complement their work. We are still hoping to arrange a joint meeting with the Adults and Health Committee to consider the improving outcomes from children and young people through better joint working between various agencies and partners.

We have felt frustration on occasions over the last few years regarding our work programme and the production of reports. We agreed to consider our work programme and when we decide future reports and agenda items at the beginning of each meeting. We have welcomed and sought Officer participation in this process of helping us to shape our on-going work programme. However having agreed our work programme and reports for our future meetings we have been disappointed as reports have either subsequently been removed from our agenda or been produced after our agenda has been published and tabled at the meeting.

The late production of reports has affected our ability to consider and digest their contents and subsequently provide constructive challenge and or comment. We accept that as Officers seek to improve outcomes for Children and Young People that their main focus, quite rightly, will be on operational matters however they also need to be able to evidence the progress they are making to our Committee, and recognise we are keen to offer them support in their endeavours but that we are currently reliant on them to explain to us how things are going.

### **3.2. Meetings overview**

During our first 2 years the Chairman and 2 Vice-Chairmen have outlined the importance for the Committee to focus on aspects of the seven priorities of Children and Young Peoples Plan (CYPP) and we agreed that our work programme should be developed through discussions with the Chairman, Vice-Chairman, DCS and Cabinet Member for Children and Families.

We subsequently agreed to have an update on progress made against improvement programme 6 of the CYPP at each meeting and this has proved to be very useful. The Chairman requested that each member of the Committee volunteer to act as a champion for each programme and 5 of the 7 programmes have benefitted from having a member champion.

We would urge our successor Committee to focus on the delivery of the Children and Young Peoples Plan (CYPP). The 7 priority themes of the CYPP are:

1. Supporting children, families and communities to become more resilient
2. Promoting healthy outcomes and giving children the best start in life
3. Improving emotional health and wellbeing
4. Building skills for life
5. Providing help early and effectively
6. Achieving effective multi-agency support for more vulnerable children and young people and developing an excellent children's social work service
7. Embedding a think family approach across the workforce

We have considered a number of reports on a range of topics and these have included:

- Regular updates on the implementation of the Children and Young People's Plan, particularly programme 6;
- Children's Safeguarding;
- Children Leaving Care;
- Data Handling and IT;
- Sedgemoor Together Team;
- Addressing Drug and Alcohol Concerns in Families;
- Annual report of Somerset Local Children's Safeguarding Board;
- Care Quality Commission's Review of Healthcare for Children Looked After and Safeguarding in Somerset;
- Updates on of local Youth Justice services;
- Strategic Vision for Education;
- Early Years and School Place Planning Infrastructure Growth Plan;
- Children's Services – Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) Action Plan Update;
- Somerset: Our County – Somerset's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA);
- Halcon One Team in Taunton and Sedgemoor Together team update;
- Updates on Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children;
- District Council's work with Vulnerable Families and Housing provision;
- Annual Children's Social Care Statutory Customer Feedback report;
- Somerset's Early Help Strategy 2016-2019;
- Children's Services Workforce Strategy;
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) updates;
- Elective Home Education (EHE);
- The Council's Medium Term Financial Plan (Budget setting process).

### **3.3. Suggestions for the Future**

Despite the occasional problem with late or deferred reports, we have noted that over the last few months the timeliness of reports has improved. However this has been perhaps largely due to us receiving a series of update reports, therefore monitoring the implementation of a Cabinet decision. Scrutiny typically can occur at 3 stages: before the Cabinet has made a decision; after the Cabinet has made a decision but before it has been implemented or lastly after the Cabinet decision and after the decision has been implemented. We feel the Council would benefit from Scrutiny being asked to undertake more pre Cabinet decision work to help the transition from policy development to implementation.

Many of the reports we have considered have been what might be described as information reports where our ability to make constructive input or provide

feedback has therefore been limited. As we look towards the next quadrennium we suggest that the Committee is asked to consider policy/plans prior to Cabinet decision and implementation. Over the last few years we have formed several time limited Task and Finish Groups and these fact based and outcome focused reviews have been very constructive and allowed us over the course of 5/6 meetings to gather more facts and information and make recommendations.

As a Committee we recognise we are still relatively new and also that we were created specifically to help improve Children's Services as it was requiring urgent improvement and to some degree support. We therefore have always endeavoured to approach our task as a 'critical friend' by trying to be supportive to Officers and encouraging them to highlight areas of concern to us, whilst hopefully providing a suitably robust challenge to question poor performance and seek reassurance that appropriate action is taken to achieve improvement. We have on occasion been able to lend our support to requests for additional resources and to offer approval to new ways of working, particularly when the Council collaborates with other agencies to bring about improvement.

#### **4. Consultations undertaken**

- 4.1. The Committee invites all County Councillors to attend and contribute to its meetings. For the purposes of this report Lead Officers and Members were invited to provide input and responses were received from 2 Members, as below.

##### **Member comments**

*I feel that the matters brought before the Committee are not scrutinised in sufficient depth and that the level should be more penetrative without being destructive. For example the first item on the last agenda an excellent first part of the presentation was followed by a very long narrative which was too long and somewhat self-defeating I thought. I feel that it should be a given that all members sitting on the committee should be expected to have read and marked the presentations for their concerns and queries and the Chair should ask the presenter to highlight the aspects of the written report that he or she feels are most important and add any last minute additional matter of progress, dangers, concerns of failure or shortcomings. That would give far more time for the questioning and fact finding that the Scrutiny should be doing.*

*The longer the presentations the less time there is for questions and the interest level decreased the longer the meeting continues so that important items as the end of a long agenda often do not get the attention that they merit.*

*Therefore overlong agendas should be avoided. Presentations should be succinct, focussed, devoid of unexplained acronyms and "management speak" obfuscation, and where possible be almost bullet pointed and clear, and contain and highlight up to date information and potential risks .*

*The Members should be fully conversant with the agenda for the meeting, the Chair should allow, given the extra time that the foregoing, would create, much more opportunities for probing questions if they are germane and not self-promoting.*

##### **Member comments**

*During my time on Scrutiny I felt that under Leigh's Chairmanship the work carried out was effective and that meetings were fair and unbiased in the way in which they were conducted.*

*However, I have been aware of the failure by some officers, on several*

*occasions, to provide adequate pre-meeting information and/or delivery of reports on time, which hampered decision making and the ability to move things forward. In such a key area of the Council's function this is unacceptable. With regard to report delivery there remains much to be desired in relation to appropriate content and the skill of some presenters. At times it felt like an uphill battle despite the best efforts of support officers.*

## **5. Implications**

- 5.1.** The Committee considers carefully, and often asks for further information about the implications as outlined in, the reports considered at its meetings.
- 5.2.** 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](http://www.somerset.gov.uk/agendasandpapers)

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