

Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee held on Friday 26 January 2018 at 10.00 in the Luttrell Room, County Hall, Taunton.

Present

Cllr L Redman (in the Chair)

Cllr A Bown

Cllr S Coles (Substitute)

Cllr Hewitt-Cooper

Cllr J Lock

Cllr Pullin (Vice Chair)

Cllr J Thorne (Substitute)

Cllr J Williams

Apologies: Cllr N Bloomfield, Cllr M Dimery, and Cllr N Taylor.
Mrs Helen Fenn (Church representative) and Mr Richard Berry – Schools Forum.

Church representatives present:

Parent Governor representatives present: Mrs Ruth Hobbs.

CHYPPS & Schools Forum representatives present: Mrs Eileen Tipper – Somerset Education Partnership Board.

Cabinet Members present: Cllr D Hall, Cllr C Lawrence and Cllr F Nicholson.

Other Members present: Cllr T Munt.

55 Declarations of interest – agenda item 2

55.0 Cllr Bown, Cllr Coles, Cllr Groskop, Cllr Hewitt-Cooper, Cllr James Hunt, Cllr Pullin, Cllr Redman, Cllr L Vjeh and Cllr J Williams all declared a personal interest as a District and/or City/Town, Parish Councillor.

55.1 Mrs Hobbs declared a personal interest as a Director of Somerset Parent Carer Forum.

55.2 Mrs Tipper declared a personal interest as a trustee of CHYPPS.

56 Minutes of the meeting held on 8 December 2017 – agenda item 3

56.0 The Committee agreed the minutes of the last meeting were accurate, and the Chair signed them.

57 Public question time – agenda time 4(taken just prior to agenda item 8)

57.0 Katherine See, a Children's Centre patron, spoke about the consultation exercise and the proposed changes to Family Support Services suggesting that

the public responses did not appear to match many of the proposed changes and asked for an explanation of why Alcombe had been preferred to Williton as a location for a Family Centre? She thought that document was misleading regarding what was suggested as being on offer from the Council, and she noted there continued to be no plans for any Council provision in Dulverton and Exmoor. In closing she requested copies of the Equalities Impact Assessment for the current proposals for Children's Centres and for the de-designation of Dulverton Children's Centre.

- 57.1 Helen Reid, a Public Health Nurse, then read aloud a statement from Mr Roughan, a UNITE trade union representative in the Somerset Partnership NHS Trust, that highlighted concerns about the proposal to take Public Health Nursing (PHN) back in house. They felt that this decision has been taken autocratically; there had been an absence of any meaningful consultation and a lack of transparency. It was stated that many believed this move was to make easier a cut of £500,000 from of the Health Visiting budget. In conclusion they advised of the creation of a group called SONATA which stood for Somerset Nurses Against Takeover, and this would coordinate raising the profile of their protest to this change and would involve amongst other activities: engaging with the media, and lobbying key stake holders.
- 57.2 Nigel Behan, UNITE Branch Secretary, acknowledged receipt of answers to the questions he'd asked at the last meeting and he asked 3 further questions about Family Support Services. Firstly he noted that following the consultation the Council believes that the proposals consulted on remain the best way to improve access, integrate support and get more from the money available, while meeting the demand for childcare and nursery places." Was this belief evidence based? The second question noted the misconception that changing the status of a children's centre building would mean a reduction in service or that families would have to travel to one of the 8 centres and he asked what factors had been taken into account when considering the "misconception"? Finally he asked about the likelihood of children centre building closures once "de-designation" (changing the status) had taken place and if this would become more likely if this happens?
- 57.3 Alan Debenham, Taunton resident and Green Party member, asked how, after the results of the comprehensive consultation process showed very significant opposition to the closing of so many Sure Start children's centres rather than the new establishment of so-called multi-professional service 'hubs, it was the latter proposals which had prevailed but without any further round of consultations to try to sell them?
The Chairman sought a response from Officers and the Director for Children's Services stated that the points raised by those members of the public would be addressed during consideration of the Family Support Services agenda item.
- 58 Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee work programme – agenda item 5**

- 58.0 The Committee considered and noted the Council's Forward Plan of proposed key decisions in forthcoming months.
- 58.1 The Committee considered and agreed its own work programme and the future agenda items listed. In addition was requested:
That the proposed Changes to the Education Travel Policy be considered by the Committee before the Cabinet Member Decision;
An information sheet be sent to All Members to provide an update on Schools National Funding Formula when the details were available;
To receive an update on the West Somerset Opportunity Area – it was noted this was on the agenda for the May meeting.
It was also noted the work programme would be further reviewed by the Chair & Vice Chair and Officers at the next pre-meeting.
- 58.2 The Committee noted the outcome tracker and the Scrutiny Manager provided updates and it was agreed this would be reviewed at the next pre-meeting. The Chair also noted on 16 March the Committee would consider the latest update report on the Children and Young Peoples Plan (Year 2 Q3) and he asked Officers to make contact with the various Committee Champions.

59 Family Support Services – agenda item 6

- 59.0 The Committee then considered the report (first on the Agenda of the 28 July meeting) which provided an update on the progress to create 'early help hubs' in local communities, agreed as a key priority in the Children and Young People's Plan 2016-2019. The 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 help reduce the gap in outcomes for those in deprived areas.
- 59.1 The agenda item comprised 2 reports; the first of which detailed the proposed development of the Family Support Service and was described as Phase 1. 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; to 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.
- 59.2 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.
- 59.3 The Committee 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.

- 59.4 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. The Committee 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.
- 59.5 The Committee also highlighted and identified concerns raised by those who had participated in the consultation exercise including recognising that staff who were currently employed and providing services were appropriately qualified Health professionals and the Committee sought reassurance that those same skills/qualifications would be required for those staff when the changes proposed in Family Support Services were implemented?
- 59.6 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. Reassurance was noted that the initial contact and continuing contact for service users would continue to be face to face and often in the home of the family. Also enhanced use of technology was intended to be an aid/complement to existing provisions, and it was noted for example that some Health Visitors used text messaging and Facebook was also a useful means of communicating.
- 59.7 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.
- 59.8 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 and were pre-determined. 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.

- 59.9 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 given that contained within the current recommendations was a 'further recommendation' to continue reviewing the provision of family centres in Minehead, Wellington, Chard and Yeovil. The Committee noted in response that Officers were content with the recommendation to de-designate buildings in those locations but to align that with a commitment to continue working with families in those areas to ensure the correct provision was available.
- 59.10 The Committee's 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.
- 59.11 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.

60 Medium Term Financial Plan 2018-2019 – agenda item 7

- 60.0 Alan Debenham, Taunton resident and Green Party member, asked was it that the proposed Council Tax overall demand is increased by 5.99% - way above inflation - at the same time as still making yet further cuts of £2.5million in Children's services AND why were those proposed cuts described in generalisations rather than specific detail e.g. showing the number of posts/jobs to be cut? In response the Committee heard that the MTFP gap increased and decreased constantly as various factors affected the budgetary position. It was noted that the increased levels of funding received via the Improved Better Care Fund along with a stabilisation of costs in Adult Social Care and Learning Disabilities had helped to reduce forecasted pressures in those services.
- 60.1 The Committee considered this 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. It was noted that the application for Somerset to be one of the pilot areas for 100% Business Rates Retention had not met with success, however the Council would be a part of a Pool with the 5 Somerset District Councils, and it was envisaged this would help generate around half a million pounds.
- 60.2 Also regarding overall funding, estimates had been received from District Councils for their tax base numbers and collection funds and these were stated as being sufficiently buoyant to include an additional income of £0.550m

regarding tax base and £1m in terms of the collection fund.

- 60.3 In response to a question about the accuracy of proposed savings targets it was explained that part of the annual roll-over process of the MTFP, led Officers to review the existing and future delivery of savings agreed for the 2017/20 MTFP, and it was clear that some of those savings were no longer considered to be deliverable. Therefore in line with setting a robust budget those had been taken into account and savings values required had been re-adjusted to balance the budget. In addition, the probable pay award of a 2% increase would add approximately £2.2m to the Council's cost and this has been included in our estimates at present. These factors had resulted in the overall projected gap in 2018/19 being £13m; the current budget gap for year-end was predicted to be £7m.
- 60.4 There was a brief discussion about what alternative plans were in place if savings targets were not met and it was noted that the contingency budget provided reassurance and detailed proposals were being worked up for each area and these were providing accurate estimates.
- 60.5 It was noted that the Cabinet would be recommended to increase the basic council tax by 2.99% along with an increase to the Adult Social Care precept of 3%. These increases would help reduce the pressure to make savings and provide much needed funding to Adult Social Care and help meet service demand and the increasing Learning Disabilities costs.
- 60.6 There was a brief discussion about the various Children's Services savings proposals and it was explained that following previous changes there was now increased capacity to review processes and functions which was not possible whilst staff pressures were so high in recent years, it was noted however that the target case work ratio for social workers would remain. 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.
- 60.7 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. It was noted that the Council was working closely with the 5 District Councils to ensure Section106 contributions and Housing Infrastructure Fund bids were secured.
- 60.8 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. The report was accepted.

61 Overview of Family Based Care (Fostering) – agenda item 8

- 61.0 The Committee considered this report that 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.
- 61.1 It was reported 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.
- 61.2 In response to a question it was noted that almost all children put forward for an independent placement were considered for fostering first as research had demonstrated that the best place for any child to grow up was in a nurturing family environment. Members noted that for some children the 'intensity' of a family environment could be too challenging due to previous experiences, and it was better for those children to be able to experience the relative space of a residential provision for a period of time. The main aim with such children was to care for them within a fostering family, or to transition them to semi-independent provision before adulthood.
- 61.3 The Chair asked if consideration had been given to producing a flow-chart or a form of easy to follow guide to show the overall process and the Director of Children's Services noted that this had been raised by others and was being progressed.
- 61.4 It was noted that as of January 2018, the Council had 225 children looked after placed with in in-house foster carers (60%) and 147 placed with independent fostering agencies (40%) and Somerset also had 51 children looked after in residential provision. It was stated that the Fostering Service marketing strategy continued to support the recruitment of in-house foster carers to meet the demand and complex needs of children looked after and it would remain a focus of this work to increase the number of in-house foster carers.
- 61.5 There was a question about the turnover of Foster Carers and what work was undertaken to identify the reasons for carers leaving and it was agreed a written response would be provided.
- 61.6 There was a question about the complaints process and how allegations were managed, and how complaints were resolved and the timescales involved. It was agreed a written response would be provided.

61.7 An overview was explained of the Peninsula Commissioning and Procurement Partnership (PCPP), a longstanding collaboration between Cornwall Council, Devon County Council (DCC), Plymouth City Council, Torbay Council and Somerset. DCC led the joint procurement and monitoring of a range of services on behalf of the partnership. Members heard that since 2006 the Council had collaborated with Peninsula to create frameworks for fostering, residential and special school placements from the independent sector. The Council also collaborated on Adopt South West, the regional adoption agency.

61.8 The update was accepted and it was agreed to request an update in a further 6 months.

62 Any other business of urgency – agenda item 9

62.0 There were no other items of business and the Chair thanked all those present for attending and closed the meeting at 12:53, noting again that at its next meeting the Committee would consider the latest update report on the Children and Young Peoples Plan (Year 2 Q3) and the asked Officers to make contact with the various Committee Champions.

(The meeting closed at 12:53)

Cllr Leigh Redman
Chair – Scrutiny for Polices, Children and Families Committee