

## **SCRUTINY FOR POLICIES, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE**

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee held in the Luttrell Room - County Hall, Taunton, on Monday 8 October 2018 at 10.00 am

**Present:** Cllr L Redman (Chair), Cllr R Williams (Vice-Chair), Cllr M Dimery, Cllr N Hewitt-Cooper, Cllr M Healey, Cllr M Keating, Cllr M Lewis, Cllr M Pullin and Cllr T Munt. Mr Peter Elliott and Mrs Eileen Tipper.

**Other Members present:** Cllr Loveridge, Cllr Chilcott, Cllr Govier, Cllr Clayton, Cllr Davies, Cllr Leyshon, Cllr Revans, Cllr Nicholson, Cllr Verdon and Cllr Fothergill.

**Apologies for absence:** Cllr G Fraschini, Cllr James Hunt, Cllr J Lock, Cllr W Wallace, Cllr J Williams, Mr Richard Berry, Ms Helen Fenn and Mrs Ruth Hobbs.

### **1 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2**

There were no declarations.

### **2 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 3**

The Committee heard questions & received statements from 26 members of the public. A number of anonymous submissions and submissions from members of the public who were unable to attend the meeting were read aloud by the Monitoring Officer.

Also, statements and results from a survey of service users was received on behalf of Family Voices Somerset and a briefing was tabled at the meeting from the UNISON trade union. The Director of Children's Services thanked all those who had submitted comments, observations and questions for doing so and responded.

It was agreed that a written response to all submissions received would be prepared and published on the Council's website, including the 12 anonymous submissions. Those question and the responses are listed in full as an Appendix to these minutes.

### **3 Review of Cabinet Decision - CAF14a "Proposals for the alteration and/or reduction of early help services provided to children and their families - get set" - Agenda Item 4**

On 8 October 2018 the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee held an Extraordinary meeting to review and 'call-in' the decision taken by the Cabinet at its meeting on 12 September 2018 regarding CAF 14a - proposals for the alteration and/or reduction of early help services provided to children and their families – 'get set'.

The Chair invited Officers to make a short presentation, to supplement the information provided in Appendix A to the report from the Director of Children's Services following the call-in request. The presentation provided an overview

and general background of Somerset's Early Help journey, described as exceptional, over the last 4 years. The report and presentation also provided an explanation of the 4 levels of need as set out in the 'Effective Support for Children and Families in Somerset' guidance.

The overview also noted the changes made in 2016 to the Early Help Assessment Form and the Early Help Advice Hub and changes to the Family Support Service last February. It was stated that the data used in the Cabinet report had been obtained from the case management system, and the apparent drop in demand for Level 2 services was reportedly due to improved practice and consistency of recording. An explanation was also provided for the rationale for the proposed changes to the individual caseloads and associated group activities for Level 2 and Level 3 Workers.

The sponsor of the call-in, Cllr Redman, explained his reasons for requesting that the Cabinet decision CAF14a be reviewed and these centred around the limited data provided to the 12 September Cabinet meeting to enable them to make their decision. He questioned if accurate data and therefore assurance had been provided to Cabinet in order to underpin the statements made in the CAF14a savings proposal that had been agreed on 12 September.

The Monitoring Officer noted therefore that the Committee's attention in considering the Call-In would be best focused on addressing the questions raised in the Call-in request, beginning on page 6 of the agenda pack.

A main point of interest and requiring clarification concerned the data provided in the Cabinet report regarding the number of referrals for Level 2 services as it was reported that those deferrals had steadily declined and there was a discussion about graphs in the report (prepared for the call-in) to help explain this point. It emerged during the discussion that the graphs, stated as showing the number of referrals, did not actually show the number of referrals but the number of open cases.

This lead on to a further discussion about the number of open cases and the interpretation of the statistical information provided. It was noted that although the narrative description and explanation in the report stated the data showed an overall decline, that comparison of the same month over a 12-month period showed little change.

In response to a question it was stated that data used had taken account the number of referrals and open cases. In response to the explanation of the data provided from the data management system being more accurate it was asked about the closure rate and how many cases had been closed but this was not known.

Regarding the graph which showed the number of open cases for level 2 (Child), Members asked about the seemingly high number of open cases in July and August as this seemed at odds with the explanation that many referrals came from schools and it was noted that most schools were not open during those months.

Members also asked why when compared to July and August in September each year there had been a large reduction in the number of open cases. In response it was stated that the number of referrals and open cases was monitored on a weekly basis and there were a variety of reasons for fluctuations between months.

The Committee did not think that the information provided in the report (either the graphs or supporting text) was particularly clear. There was also a discussion about the reasons provided to explain the apparent drops in the number of open cases and the Committee noted that this could be due to several factors not just a fall in demand for Level 2 services.

It was stated that the referral process itself had not changed, however it was noted that families could no longer self-refer, so therefore a like for comparison was not possible. The Committee did not think clear evidence had been provided to the Cabinet to demonstrate either a drop in the number of open cases/referrals or the reasons for fluctuations in the number of open cases and/or referrals.

There was a discussion about the difference between the 4 levels of need and the Director of Children's Services noted that the work between level 2 and 3 was very different and required different skills and there were different staff. He reiterated that the proposals under CAF 14a related to the reduction in the number of staff only and this would have no impact on the level of services available or provided. In response to a question about current demand it was noted that this had 2 elements, the number of referrals and the number of open cases.

There was a detailed discussion, including further questions and statements were made by Members of the Committee and the Director for Children's Services and the Assistant Director - Commissioning and Performance and other officers responded to points that had been raised.

It was confirmed that the information contained in the presentation provided at the meeting and in the call-in report had not been provided to the Cabinet at its meeting on 12 September and this was the first time all of the supporting information had been drawn together and presented to Members.

During the discussion the Committee sought reassurance on the issue of 'other statutory agencies/partners' being able to provide positive outcomes and members asked about the capacity of those other statutory agencies and partners to provide the 'backfill' if SCC reduced staffing levels as proposed. In response it was stated that there were a range of early help services in place across Somerset that were able to support families currently and that 'get set' was one part of the overall early help offer available.

The Cabinet report had set out that due to a falling number of referrals it would follow that there could be a safe reduction in the number of staff and an increase in each Level 2 and Level 3 caseworkers caseload. It was stated that each manager had line management responsibility for 8 caseload workers

In response the Committee heard that the proposals in CAF14a related to a reduction in staff only and that this would not mean a reduction in the service provided, but that this would be subject to consultation under CAF14b.

The Committee did not think clear evidence had been provided to the Cabinet to demonstrate that a reduction in the number of Level 2 and Level 3 caseworkers would not result in reduction of service for those accessing Level 2 and/or Level 3 services.

The Committee noted that it had been acknowledged that some areas held waiting lists (for those wishing to access Level 2 services), and this seemed to indicate services had no capacity based on current staffing levels, notwithstanding any possible increase in demand.

The Committee did not think clear evidence had been provided to the Cabinet, in the absence of there being any statutory guidance, to explain how following the reduction in staffing figures, the proposed increase in individual staff caseload ratios for both Level 2 and Level 3 workers had been reached.

In summary and reflecting on the responses to a number of questions raised in the call-in review including, data, demand for services, caseloads for workers and reductions in staff the Committee did not feel that the additional supporting evidence, which it noted had not been considered by the Cabinet, had provided assurance about the decision taken by the Cabinet in respect of CAF14a.

The Committee then agreed, in light of clarification provided by officers, to request that the Cabinet receive a report based on that presented today from the Director of Children's Services at their next meeting and review the decision for CAF 14a that was taken on 12th September with the aim of deferring the implementation pending the completion of the consultation on CAF 14b with staff, partners and service users in order to allow for a comprehensive proposal to come back to Cabinet for decision in Feb 2019.

#### 4 **Any other urgent items of business** - Agenda Item 5

There were no other items of business and the Chair thanked all those present for attending and closed the meeting at 1.00pm.

**Appendix to the minutes - Public Questions and Statements received  
Review of Cabinet Decision - CAF14a "Proposals for the alteration and/or  
reduction of early help services provided to children and their families -  
getset"**

### **Question 1 - Diane Bennett**

I moved to Shepton Mallet, Somerset, in March 2017 after living for 33 years in South Cambridgeshire where I raised three daughters (mostly as a single parent, and on a very low income). When my daughters were still very young I worked part-time in various charity-funded pre-school settings and attained a Certificate in Early Years Practice (NVQ 4 equivalent qualification) from the Open University. I also worked in a home education setting, supporting a child with severe additional needs for well over ten years, supporting her in her transition from home education to special school when she was aged 13 and in all of her participation in out-of-home activities (including children's clubs, youth groups and Girl Guiding - both mainstream and special needs-targeted). Via Somerset You Can Do (which closes in November this year), I have been registered as a volunteer since mid 2017. I started a volunteer placement at Glastonbury's getset centre in December 2017, attending their weekly Stay, Play & Learn sessions at the Glastonbury Library venue. In this placement, primarily as "an extra pair of hands," I have been privy to the provision delivered by the competent and professional getset staff members running these sessions. I have also observed the benefits that these sessions have for the children and families who attend (either regularly or sporadically). I know full well, from my own experiences as a parent of young children and from my work with another child with additional needs, that a support infrastructure is paramount to a whole family's well being and that the earliest possible intervention is the preferable route for all (in terms of financial cost to individual families and society as well as, more importantly, a family's quality of life, both short- and long-term).

From my standpoint, the benefits to children and their families from this aspect of the getset services are immeasurable: the provision gives children opportunities for socialisation, play, learning and development that extend their home experiences; it gives adult family members/carers opportunities for support that are tailored to their own needs; it gives whole families access to early-intervention support in a non-judgemental environment. Withdrawal of the service seems to me a devastatingly retrograde step in our society's support of children and families, and very short-sighted.

**Response** - thank you for taking the time to respond and we acknowledge your response. This proposal is not to withdraw the service, although SCC will be consulting shortly on the future of the getset level 2 service and we will include your response in that public consultation exercise.

### **Question 2 - Elvira Elliott**

Why are referrals the only consideration for cutting the service when most of us who use the universal groups at the children's centre were never referred there? The children's centre and GETSET have been a constant source of support to myself and my children for 6 years. I am disabled and my children have special needs. We came for a playgroup and found support, advice, community, and so much more. Why are we not being counted as valid service users?

In 6 years I have seen parents with mental health problems, learning difficulties, abusive partners and even a mother who was physically abusing her child picked up and supported/helped through attending the universal

groups I have attended. What mechanism is going to be put in place to identify and carry out these early interventions now?

Barely a year ago our children's centre was closed and moved at great expense into a purpose built space in the library. What is happening to all the toys and resources from the closed children's centres and what do the council propose happens to the lovely, new, purpose built GETSET centre in Glastonbury?

If this centre closes there will be no affordable indoor space to bring children to in Street or Glastonbury. This is bound to result in isolation for new mothers and an increase in PND and decrease in breastfeeding. What services will be put in place to prevent the burden of this falling onto the overwhelmed social services and NHS mental health services?

Last of all, if a skeleton staff is proposed, for a service that has already seen 3 rounds of devastating cuts, why would anyone want to take those jobs with a guaranteed overload of cases, no support, and no job security?

**Response** - We have considered referrals, open cases and caseload information in coming to these decisions to reduce staff numbers in the getset service. We are aiming to retain groups and activities over this period. A public consultation will shortly be launched to explore the future provision of the service and what SCC provides in future; all service users are encouraged to take part in that consultation.

There are clear local safeguarding board processes in place for all practitioners who work with children (across early years providers, schools, health, police and the voluntary sectors) to be able to identify vulnerable children, support them and request additional support from other services. This remains unchanged.

No children's centre buildings or services are affected by this staff reduction; Glastonbury hub remains unchanged.

There are a range of early help services in place across Somerset that support families now; getset is one part of the early help offer available.

Unfortunately, the financial situation in local government is and continues to be very challenging, and the cuts across council services are having to be taken because of these reasons. The proposed caseloads for getset staff are considered manageable and staff are regularly supervised, trained and supported by their managers who maintain oversight of the day to day work of the service.

### **Question 3 - Level 3 Family Intervention Worker**

Why are Level 2 and Level 3 services being cut when it is getset and Early Help have made a direct contribution in the "Journey to Good"?

**Response** – the cuts are no reflection on the excellent work that the service provides. The council cannot afford to continue funding the service and has to concentrate its funding on its core statutory duties.

### **Question 4 - Level 3 Family Intervention Worker**

Have the views of service users and partners been consulted as to a reported drop in referrals and the reasons for this and if not why not?

This staff member has requested anonymity

**Response** – This proposal was specifically to reduce staff numbers in getset. A public consultation was also agreed by cabinet as part of CAF-14b to explore the future provision of the service; this will be launched in November 2018.

**Question 5 - Level 2 Family Support Worker**

Have the council followed Sure Start Statutory Guidelines in regard to the reduction of services in Children's Centres in Somerset?

This worker has requested anonymity.

**Response** – this proposal is not to reduce children's centre services. A public consultation will be launched in November to explore the future provision of the service, in line with that required by Sure Statutory Guidelines. The decisions made by Cabinet in February 2018 re Children's Centre buildings remains unchanged.

**Question 6 - Level 3 Family Intervention Worker**

If the newly Community Adolescent Team are passing to referrals to getset due to over capacity are those figures counted in getset referrals and are they taking capacity that should have gone to getset?

This worker has requested anonymity

**Response** – Any cases that getset accept would be recorded in the services data. The Community Adolescent Team data is reported separately and is not part of this proposal.

**Question 7 - Level 3 Family Intervention Worker**

Why are they reducing the service for Level 3 but will increase caseload after the cuts?

This worker is anonymous

**Response** - the average caseload held in Level 3 across Somerset in the last 12 months has been 1:8, although the current case load expectations is for a full time worker to hold a caseload of 1:10 - 12 families. There is no national guidance on the appropriate level of caseloads for early help practitioners, and practice varies across Local Authorities depending on service focus. The proposal is to move to a caseload of 15 families per full time worker and this will be managed and supervised closely.

**Question 8 - L2 Family Support Worker** I have been a family support worker for nearly 7 years working with vulnerable children and families on issues such as housing, debt, domestic abuse, securing 2 Year Old Funding to get a nursery place and helping people back to work. I have dealt with families in absolute crisis - with no

food, no beds, no money, I have negotiated with housing departments and landlords, secured food bank vouchers and supported people to attend medical appointments when their mental health was so bad that they could not manage this alone. I have helped to get emergency contraception for young mums and have been an advocate for people who have no voice. Who on earth will help these families if the getset Level 2 service is removed?

These families wouldn't meet the Level 3 or 4 criteria initially and the whole point of early help is to have a preventative role. I am scared that

the future will see an increase in Serious case Reviews where a child has been killed or subject to serious harm along with more referrals to Social Care because things will be left until the last minute and children will be damaged for life. I don't want this on my conscience, do you?

Anonymous

**Response** - the proposal is to reduce Level 2 staffing in line with reduced demand and planned changes to caseload expectations; there will still be a level 2 and 3 service in place. There is a planned public consultation which will launch in November to explore the future provision of the service including what other support is available for families. SCC with its key partners must ensure the safety and welfare of local children which we will do through the consultation exercise which will inform proposals to Cabinet in February 2019.

#### **Question 9 - Level 2 Family Support Worker**

Why is half of my caseload transferred directly from level 3 due to being triaged incorrectly at the Hub? this will not be included in Level 2 statistics.

Anonymous

**Response** – Open cases on the system are allocated to workers so activity would be recorded in the correct level of the service. Across all aspects of children's services including the Early Help Advice Hub, we continue to monitor and audit work to ensure correct thresholds are maintained. If you continue to have concerns please do discuss this with your manager.

#### **Question 10 - Level 2 Family Support Worker**

Has it been considered that the reported drop in referrals during July and August are due to Schools and Nursery's being term time only therefore there is no one there to make referrals. Further more getset staff are encouraged to take Annual Leave in this known quieter time and some staff are on term time only contracts as getset work force is mainly female. And have you seen the waiting list for case allocation during this time?

Anonymous

**Response** – It is true that there is normally a reduction in referrals from schools over holiday periods; this is why we have used average data across a longer time period to allow for those seasonal peaks and troughs. Waiting lists are monitored closely by the managers in the service and work allocated accordingly.

#### **Question 11 - Family Support Worker**

How can the data that was used to create the new version of getset in May 2018 when new posts were created now be used to reduce the very same service?

Anonymous

**Response** - The restructure which was implemented in June 2018 was designed to prepare for the proposed integration with the Public Health Nursing team from April 2019; after April 2019 further staffing changes would then have been made. Unfortunately, the financial position of the council means that savings have to be made more quickly and more deeply than was originally planned.



**Question 12 - Get Set Worker Level 2** (submitted and wished for anonymity)

I have worked as part of a Taunton One Team for 4 years and have seen various changes to getset services.

I have valued the service and appreciated working together with Family Intervention Workers.

Prior to April 2017 L2 and L3 FIWs regularly played a significant part in multi agency one team working.

In addition to sharing advice with agencies about issues relating to early intervention they were able to suggest when a referral was appropriate and promoted their service.

I was shocked and disappointed that following changes to management in April 2017 a decision was made that L3 FIWs would be represented at one team meetings but not L2.

I challenged this, not least because a great deal of the families causing concern discussed at meetings have children under school age and one teams are aimed at providing early intervention.

In my experience when agencies do not participate in one team meetings other professionals miss opportunities to make referrals. Over time I think this has most certainly happened and perhaps agencies have forgotten how valuable a service L2 is.

There are 10 one teams across Somerset and I would suggest the decision last year to restrict L2 attendance has had a significant impact on referrals. I think the potential loss of a L2 service would be catastrophic in an area where there is a busy children's centre and so many families with young children.

**Response** - Thank you for your comments. Getset staff have continued to attend multi agency meetings like the One Teams and Team Around the School, and they represent the whole service when they are in attendance. This proposal is to reduce staffing levels but to maintain a smaller level 2 service. In November a public consultation will be launched to explore the future provision of the service.

**Question 13 - Kelly Enfield**

Referrals in level 2 have been reduced for the following reasons: health visitors are depleting and therefore unable to refer, getset no longer receive self referrals, the method of referral through EHA is too long and too complicated - it puts families off and takes significant time for professionals to complete and we run fewer groups therefore having fewer opportunities for early intervention. has this been looked at?

**Response** – early help is the responsibility of all agencies that work with children. The use of the EHA by all practitioners continues to be mandated by the Somerset Safeguarding Children Board, and is regularly reviewed with partners. It is crucial that families consent is secured and that as much information is provided to services who are being asked to provide support for children and families.

**Question 14 - Jules Gill**

Why are the proposed figures for reduction for Level 3 nearly 45% when we were told it would be 20% of the level 3 service?

**Response** - These percentage figures were given in August staff meetings as a very early indication of the likely reductions of family intervention workers, as proposals were still being prepared for cabinet and the HR Business Case. The details of actual staff reductions are included in the consultation paper that has now been shared with the unions and staff.

### **Question 15 - Liam Canham**

I have had the pleasure of working with you during your time at Acorns Children Centre in Halcon as the Early Help Officer there and in my capacity as the Area Housing Manager for the east of Taunton. During our time there, it is my belief, and as evidenced by the Bath Spa report in to the One Team working model, that we undertook some truly revolutionary and effective work to improve our communities lives.

Sadly, this started to go awry in 2016, when SCC decided to change the modelling of early help in Somerset. It would appear that not only have things gone awry since, but have been catastrophically harmed to the detriment of our communities with the latest round of cuts sanctioned in September 2018.

The proposals as I understand it that were sanctioned are: "Proposals for the alteration and/or reduction of early help services provided to children and their families – getset", which in the summary actually talks about "to no longer provide level 2 services" (subject to 'consultation' etc, I appreciate), I find completely and utterly perverse. After the many months and indeed years SCC have spent, not to mention the money (looking at VFM from tax payers etc), redeveloping their child protection strategy, the pain it has taken to bring in the step up/down process for local practitioners, the focus on Early Intervention and therefore Early years services, to be all of a sudden be considered for dismantling is in my professional view-counterproductive, dangerous and in my personal view, abhorrent. I am also intrigued by the utter tripe that these cuts will not detrimentally affect our community. I find this intriguing as either their assessment on how circa £2M worth of cuts to early help services will affect those most in need is wildly off the mark, or in effect they are saying they have been wasting circa £2M worth of funding on a service that is not required-they cannot have their cake and eat it and whichever way the truth lies, it is another example of gross mismanagement. In my view what we will see as a result of this proposal is a return to 'how things used to be', with referrals being put straight in at CSC level, these referrals being rejected as not meeting CSC threshold and vulnerable people, children and families falling between the gaps. It also begs the question, where does the One Team process fit into all of this? It seems that the whole partnership approach is dismantling all around us and the return to working in silo's is upon us-after so much investment this surely cannot be allowed to happen?

I appreciate that all public sector organisations face difficult decisions in terms of balancing budgets and delivering services, however we cannot surely let our most vulnerable in society down by pulling the investment made in these areas. It would appear to me that SCC have fallen into the same old trap of cut, cut, cut, rather than looking at sustaining investment in certain areas-I am sure that if they carry out what they are proposing above, that costs in this sector (Child protection), will rise far greater than any savings made, as we see vulnerable families spiral out of control. Surely the

'invest to save' mantra serves far better in this area, to ensure that families are properly and appropriately supported?

As you know only too well, I have had frustrations and concerns (not on my own) regarding SCC's lack of proper and meaningful engagement (in my personal view) in the One Team process historically, however that has always been justified (in some way shape or form), that SCC and CSC were developing their own strategy in tandem and to fit with the One Team way of working-and now for it to be on the verge of collapse, where does this leave us all?

The notion, rationale and justification for making cuts to Level 2 services, due to a lack or drop in referrals is quite frankly offensive. What we have repeatedly seen over many years is the further bureaucratisation of providing help to vulnerable people. The Early Help Assessment is just a complete and utter barrier to getting the much required early intervention to families, due to its over complicated nature which prevent individuals from either having the time to refer 'correctly' or indeed in some instances the ability to do so. I suggest to the leadership at SCC that the reason for falling referrals may in part be down to their over complicated, restricted referral process as opposed to a decline in need, which I think every practitioner on the ground would suggest is ever increasing.

I am so desperately upset, disheartened and angry about once again the short-termism shown by our 'leaders' that it truly makes me wonder if any of them are fit for office?! It is all too easy to blame Central Government cuts (which of course do have an impact), however this problem is not solely down to Central Government cuts and therefore our leadership must take a long hard look at themselves and reflect upon how this has been allowed to happen. I fear not only for our own County, but for the County as this sort of attitude is replicated across many Counties up and down the Country-we need radical change and a new approach to running public services, not to mention competent and professional individuals to lead the delivery of such important services to ensure social justice for all.

**Response** - thank you for your comments. CAF-14a which was the subject of the call-in is specifically about a reduction in staffing levels; the level 2 and 3 service provided by getset remains for the time being. CAF-14b is the proposal for a public consultation which will launch in November to explore the future provision of the service including what other support is available for families. SCC with its key partners must ensure the safety and welfare of local children which we will do through the consultation exercise which will inform proposals to Cabinet in February 2019.

The use of the EHA by practitioners is mandated by the Somerset Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) which is a multi-agency board encompassing local authorities (including the district councils), police, health and education partners. It is not an SCC form.

Unfortunately, the council cannot continue to fund the services it currently provides and has to concentrate on its core statutory functions. We will still continue to work with partners on SSCB and the Early Help Commissioning Board to ensure there is an effective system to identify and support those families that need additional help.

## **Question 16 - Comments And Questions Relating To Somerset County Councils Decision To Reduce Early Help Services provided to Children.**

(Anonymous)

Somerset County Council's recent Cabinet decision to reduce and make cuts to the 'getset' Early Help Service with the proposed reduction of 70 to 80 jobs will undoubtedly have a negative impact on children and families in Somerset, resulting in children and parents being unable to access the right support/services at the point of need.

I feel this would greatly reduce the local authority's ability to provide the statutory offer for children that is set out in the Children's Act 2014 and to deliver a Working Together to Safeguard Children agenda within Somerset.

I question, how Somerset County Council will continue to provide targeted early help services, which will address the assessed needs of children and families and will prioritise how to improve the outcomes for children and young people? To be successful these services need to be integrated through communities, need to be given time to build and consolidate to become robust services for vulnerable children and young people. I understand this is what getset services was set up to achieve but continuous challenges, changing agenda's and goals due to budgets and restructures has not given the service time to fulfil its potential.

As I understand it, if actioned Somerset County Councils proposed plan would effect mainly staff working for getset at Level 2. This concerns me greatly because this is where early help is crucial for families with babies and young children up to the age of 5 years, often a time when families are most vulnerable.

The Level 2 work includes staff working to prevent a child's need for support escalating to a threshold that requires a higher level of support. This is through offering parenting support, advice, information, signposting to other services and most importantly giving young children a voice.

Although the work is complex and will often involve working closely with other professionals. The Level 2 service appears to have been judged on the recent drop in referrals, on caseloads for staff with a rational in place for the time spent to deliver children's centre groups and activities.

There may be many complex reasons why referrals have reduced at Level 2. I question why Somerset County's Council feel this should result in the service being cut?

I think this should be a concern to Somerset County Council and should be explored and reviewed to ensure children are not lost in a referral process that has changed frequently since the development of getset.

Questions need to be asked before decisions are made to understand fully:

- Has it become more difficult for some agencies to refer?
- Has new processes rejected referrals and have families been left unsupported?
- Is this why there has been a large increase in level 3 referrals?
- Have threshold's changed?

Although referrals are monitored and caseloads for staff are recorded with set targets it is not clear how staff at Level 2 monitor all the extra responsibilities of

the job role. For example, being in direct contact with parents and children within groups will often lead to staff:

- signposting and supporting families to other services
- sourcing information vital for families
- modelling and promoting positive relationships through play and positive interaction
- undertaking daily preventive work
- early identification of children with additional needs
- offering guidance and support strategies
- And much more

All of which will need to be followed up and would be on top of a Family support workers planned workload. The impact and difference this type of getset level 2 work has for children and families is so valuable. It is truly what early help and prevention is all about, being in the right place at the right time. Unfortunately this impact is hard to measure and may only be appreciated years later.

I feel Level 2 staff have continued to retain the Children's centre approach in the service they provide, often needing to be all things to all people. This service has been within a shrinking Level 2 service, where staff have had to work over a larger geographical area and there has also been many management changes. In comparison recruitment for Level 3 getset service has increased and staff appear to have clearer roles that are easier to monitor and provide data to support the work undertaken.

Somerset County Council may need to make difficult financial decisions, but by making a decision to drastically reduce a much needed early help service can only result in additional pressure for statutory services which will be more costly in the long term.

**Response** – thank you for your comments. These are difficult decisions to make and are no reflection on the excellent work provided by getset staff, but unfortunately the council can no longer fund everything it once did.

In response to your comments regarding referrals into the service, this is through the Early Help Assessment which has been in place since September 2016 and is mandated by the Somerset Safeguarding Children Board. There has been no change since. The Effective Support for Children and Families in Somerset (thresholds guidance) was launched by Somerset Safeguarding Children Board in February 2016, and there is ongoing work across children's services to ensure thresholds are maintained and that children and families are supported by the right service at the right level of intervention to meet their needs.

Caseloads of all staff are monitored by managers through regular supervision so effective support is provided to children and families; work through groups and delivering parenting programmes is considered when managers are allocating new referrals to staff.

We will be launching a public consultation in November to explore the future provision of the service and your comments will be fed in to that exercise.

#### **Question 17 - Beks Saunders**

How will Early Years children & their parents access appropriate support, stopping escalation before they become school age?

**Response** – there are already a range of services, interventions and approaches available in Somerset. Early help is the responsibility of all agencies that work with children and where additional support is needed for a child there is an established system in place, outlined in the Effective Support for Children and Families in Somerset. Somerset Choices and Professional Choices outline this system and the support that is available.

**Question 18 - Sally Devlin**

Part of the proposal is that much of getset work would be picked up by partner agencies if the proposed cuts are agreed. What consultation has taken place with partner agencies to ensure that they have capacity to undertake this much needed provision to support vulnerable children and families in the county?

**Response** – CAF 14-a which was subject to the call-in is specifically a staff reduction and is being consulted with staff. CAF-14b outlines the requirement for a public consultation which will include the public, stakeholders, staff and service users to explore the future provision of the service.

**Question 19 - Nigel Behan**

Relates to Proposal CAF-14a Children's Services - "Reduce staffing levels in the Getset service in response to falling number of level 2 referrals and by increasing caseload targets across the service." 2 follow up questions relating to Cabinet on 12 September when I asked:

Will removing these preventative early intervention services result in further pressures (including financial-"consequential costs down the line"?) elsewhere in Children's Social Care, increased Social Work activity and more reactive responses to more crisis situations (Similar to the response on BBC Radio Somerset by the Chief Officer of Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) who said a cut to their budget by SCC will lead to extra pressure on other public services including the NHS and will cost more)? Has an Equality Impact Assessment been completed?"

Q1 the verbal reply given at the Cabinet meeting included a phrase "there is no clear evidence" referring to early intervention (prevention) that it is effective(?) Does this Committee think further clarification should be sought (did the reply refer to outcomes and/or cost savings). Can all the empirical evidence (including operational models and research papers) that have been analysed be published on the SCC website for inspection?

Q2 at a number of recent meetings relating to Getset, it has been claimed that the proposed model of service is based on particular Northern (Local) Authority areas. Are those Local Authorities/Areas comparable to Somerset (rurality, demography etc.)? Can further information be supplied for further critical assessment?

**Response**

Question 1 – there is little national evidence to support the impact of early help. Bodies like the Early Intervention Foundation and Research in Practice and programmes like Troubled Families provide useful information that local authorities utilise. We also link with national and regional events and learning opportunities to understand what models and interventions do work, and this

can go some way to aiding local authorities but all are subject to local conditions, demography, geography and how local services are organised.

Question 2 – the reference to Northern Local Authorities is the fact that as funding cuts continue, services for children are being reduced to the core statutory functions and this has happened particularly in the north.

**Question 20 - Jessica Parsons**

Colleagues in Social Care are allocated cases on the number of children in each family the ratio being 1 worker to 17 children as a maximum. Getset broke from this accepted norm and count cases by family irrespective of the number of children within it. For example, one worker could be allocated 10 cases but be addressing the needs of 50 children. The figures presented therefore, could be hiding significant numbers of service users receiving support. Why did getset change the way of counting cases and has this been taken into account in determining safe case load ratios?

**Response** – As part of good management practice the capacity of all casework teams across Children's Services is regularly reviewed and adjusted to address demand. There is no national guidance on the appropriate level of caseloads for early help practitioners, and practice varies across Local Authorities depending on service focus.

Each worker's caseload is carefully managed and supervised by their manager to ensure effective work can be carried out with the child (ren) and family as appropriate. Each family is different and managers will consider the capacity of the family support worker when looking to allocate new referrals in to the service.

**Question 21 - Karen Marsh**

With the reduction in tier 2 intervention get set services, what strategies are being put into place to manage the increase in tier 3 and 4 cases which will occur as a consequence of Early Help becoming Late Help?

**Response** – with the planned increase in caseloads for level 2 staff there is no expectation that demand will increase at other levels. Thresholds remain unchanged and caseloads of all children's services casework teams will continue to be managed and reviewed to meet demand.

**Question 22 - Kerry Wood**

As an Early Years Professional I have experienced first hand the difficulties in convincing parents of the value of early intervention and in the EHA referral process. Given the proposed cuts to Getset services, how are Somerset County Council going to ensure that they fulfill their statutory responsibilities and that support will be provided enabling parents especially the vulnerable which will empower them to provide improved outcomes for both their children and themselves.

**Response** – the public consultation we will launch shortly will ensure that the council considers feedback from all partners, staff and service users as to the future provision of the service. SCC must still ensure it meets its core statutory functions for the most vulnerable children. The Somerset Safeguarding

Children Board have a key role in assuring itself that all partners are meeting their responsibilities to protect and safeguard children.

**Question 23 - Sharon Collard**

Is the proposed reduction in getset Early Help service being completed in line with the Sure Start statutory guidance?

For example through a public consultation and ensuring that where they decide to close a children's centre site, the outcomes for children, particularly the most disadvantaged, would not be adversely affected and will not compromise the duty to have sufficient children's centres to meet local need.

**Response** – A public consultation will be launched in November to explore the future provision of the service, in line with that required by Sure Statutory Guidelines. The decisions made by Cabinet in February 2018 re Children's Centre buildings remains unchanged.

**Question 24 - Richard Hobbs on behalf of Somerset Parent Carer Forum**

1. The OFSTED report published in Jan of this year stated, "Early help services in Somerset have improved, yet are not fully established across the partnership". As Somerset County Council have yet to achieve a rating of good in their social care inspection, does the council feel that by reducing early help they will be able to provide good quality social care and improve outcomes for our children?

2. The OFSTED report published in Jan of this year also stated "Early help assessments ... are still too variable and not all are sufficiently focused on actions for improving children's outcomes. Assessments do not always analyse children's experiences sufficiently and not all risks are clearly articulated." In light of this do you

a) acknowledge there is a risk that the reduction in the number of get set cases open could be due to the poor quality EHA's?

b) feel that reducing a service based on referral numbers via early help assessments of variable quality is robust, has this risk been identified and a plan to mitigate it produced.

3. Sections 3.5 and 3.6 of the report discuss the groups being run by 'getset'. Feedback from a recent survey and conversations with families highlighted how vital these services are. Families relayed how the groups reduced their feelings of isolation. The Improving Lives Strategy acknowledges that "A lack of social contact and feelings of isolation and loneliness can have a significant impact on mental health and wellbeing." This is a key area of focus for the strategy over the next 10 years. Please can you

A. Clarify if all the families accessing the groups will have had an EHA and therefore be included in the data given

B. Explain how this cut in 'getset' service is compatible with the focus and vision of the Improving Lives Strategy?

**Response**

Q1. Ofsted expect early help support to be available across all partners, not just for it to be provided by the Council. SCC with its partners will continue to address this to ensure effective early help arrangements are in place. There are no planned reductions in staffing of social workers and there is continuing focus on improving quality of practice and improving outcomes for children.



Q2. EHAs that request additional support from getset are triaged by the Early Help Advice Hub. If there is information missing the staff in the hub will contact the practitioner to ensure the EHA includes sufficient information for getset to be able to undertake a clear piece of work with the child(ren) and family as necessary.

The reduction in staff outlined in CAF 14-a is based on referrals, open cases and caseload information.

Q3. An EHA should only be undertaken with the consent of the parent (s). It cannot be assumed that parents that attend universal groups will also have an EHA. The time that family support workers spend on groups and programmes is factored into their capacity and caseholding duties.

Unfortunately the council cannot afford to run all the services it once did and these difficult decisions have to be made. There is still a wide variety of universal services, groups and activities that are available for families across Somerset.

**(The meeting ended at 1.00 pm)**

**CHAIRMAN**