
SCRUTINY FOR POLICIES, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES

24 January 2020
(Published on 28 January 2020)

Minutes from the previous meeting - Agenda item 3	Action
The Committee agreed that the minutes of the last meeting were an accurate record.	
Public Question Time - Agenda item 4	Action
There were no questions asked, statements made or petitions presented.	
Scrutiny Work Programme - Agenda item 5	Action
<p>The Chair of the Committee invited Members to consider the Cabinet's Forward Plan of proposed key decisions in forthcoming months and suggest any items for the Committee to consider. The plan was noted.</p> <p>The Chair directed attention to the Committee's own work programme and invited suggestions for possible future agenda items.</p> <p>The Vice Chair informed the Committee that the Task and Finish Group on School Exclusions had held several meetings and had begun collating information. It had decided that its review might take longer than originally thought, and he hoped that their final report would be provided at the April meeting.</p> <p>It was agreed to bring the Elective Home Education update forward to the March meeting.</p> <p>There was a brief discussion about 'preventative work' and it was agreed that the Chair, Vice Chair, and Mrs Tipper would meet to discuss a potential agenda item.</p> <p>It was noted that the Outcome Tracker had been refreshed and updated and this was accepted.</p>	<p></p> <p></p> <p></p> <p>Dave Farrow</p> <p>Scrutiny Manager</p>
Medium Term Financial Plan for Children's Services - Agenda item 6	Action
The Committee considered this report that summarised the key messages from the Medium-Term Financial Plan (2020-23) Strategy Report considered and approved by Cabinet on 18 December 2019. It also included an overall assurance narrative from the Director for Children's Services (DCS) alongside more details about the key areas of focus for	

transformation in the next few years, and further explanation of the reasons for movements in levels of spend and funding between years over the MTFP period.

It was explained that last year the Council had recognised the need to address its financial challenges and the importance of setting a robust budget for this year as well as laying foundations for the financial plans for 2020/21 and 2021/22. The report continued that process and revised indicative figures for 2020/21 and 2021/22 and looking further ahead to 2022/23.

It was noted that the MTFP Strategy recognised the Council's declaration of a climate change emergency last February and was now working with partners to develop a Climate Emergency Strategy. When later in 2020 a strategy had been adopted the Council would need a financial strategy that would be flexible enough to reflect agreed priorities. Pending this strategy, no specific activities had been factored into the indicative budget proposals at this stage.

The focus of the report was to enhance understanding of the services spending requirements and areas of transformation required to be delivered within Children's Services. Members heard this would aid understanding of the on-going risks within approved budgets, the levels of reserves, balances and contingencies, as well as the mitigations aimed at limiting the impact on core services, especially those prioritised in the County Plan.

Attention turned to Table 1 in the report which showed the total net budget for Children's Services for the MTFP period 2020-23 broken down by service area. Those budgets reflected the previous indicative budgets agreed by full Council in last February, adjusted for expected movements since then.

It was noted that overall the total increase in budgets across the MTFP was 14%, and the 2020/21 proposed budget for Children's Services, of £86.5m, represented a year on year increase 7.9%. This had been assessed as being necessary, despite the re-basing of the Children's Services budget applied in 2018/19 and reflected the on-going demand for core Children's Services (in terms of volume and complexity).

In response to a question Members heard that the Children's Services budget was based on assumptions in relation to partners, including the NHS, Police, Schools and the capacity of other Council services to deliver the strategic priorities set out in the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) 2019-22 and continued multi-agency operational improvements overseen by the new Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership arrangements. Grant Thornton (the Council's Auditors) had provided helpful challenge to achieve a more realistic demand forecast resulting in a more secure budget for Children's Social Care.

There was a discussion of the report that set out changes to the

requirement to spend by the services, after having considered service demands, and inflation, and progress achieved in delivery of previously agreed plans and looked forward reflecting future planned transformation and efficiency plans. Members noted the movements represented changes from the existing MTFP (2019-22) agreed in last February and adhere to the key principle of ensuring robust, transparent budgets were set for future budgets. This would place the Council in the best position to effectively monitor service spending needs and funding.

There was a question to the DCS about the areas he regarded as representing key risks to the Council and he noted that he would like to see improvement in retaining and attracting high quality staff; improving care placements for children and young people in Somerset; improve foster service recruitment; and noted the frustration regarding one-off and/or short term funding and the uncertainty it created regarding planning and delivering services.

The Committee agreed to:

- Support the financial strategy and welcome the long-term view as presented;
- Note that the Director of Children’s Services was content with the rebasing of the budget for the 2020/21 financial year, representing a 7.9% on year increase;
- Note the uncertainty of some grant funding, as this represented about 4% of the Children’s Services budget and the potential impact on future funding/spending;
- Support the Director of Children’s Services and staff and to encourage the Director and Cabinet to continue to seek and develop innovative solutions.

The Committee requested that an update report on the work of the SENDIAS team be brought to the next meeting.

The Chair thanked the Interim Director of Finance, on account of it being the last meeting she would attend in this capacity, noting her clear and concise explanations of complex issues and he wished her well for the future.

Family Safeguarding - Agenda item 7

Action

The Committee received a presentation on Family Safeguarding. It was explained that the idea was to bring adult workers into integrated teams with children’s workers to strengthen the whole family. This would then help children to remain with birth families and not come into care, reducing the ‘care population’ – both in prevention and return home.

It was explained that the way the Council operated needed to change if it was to continue to deliver and achieve its aims within the financial realities of modern local government. After a period of hard work and tough decisions the Council had a projected, albeit short-term, period of financial

stability. Preventative aspects of Children's Services had been reduced would now be focused on a new approach, to prevent rather than react, that would enable the Council to improve lives earlier, faster and in a way that was more joined up with partner agencies.

Family Safeguarding was described as bringing adult workers into new and integrated teams with children's workers, as this would strengthen the whole family so that children could remain with birth families and not go into care. This new approach would enable the Council to work on Ofsted's criticism of 'less than good' multi-agency working between services for vulnerable families and was based on a recognised practice model for effective family intervention having been successfully introduced in Hertfordshire a number of years earlier.

Members were reminded that in 2015 Public Health Somerset had published a 'Hidden Harm' needs assessment and it had highlighted the issue of 'mental health', 'substance misuse' and 'domestic abuse' in households with children across Somerset, identifying areas of overlap between the three factors. It was noted that last August of the 3735 children in need of protection or support in Somerset 14% of those (528 cases) had all three hidden harm factors.

Social work assessments had identified that 70% (2,600) of those children had at least one 'hidden harm' parental factor identified and those were reported as being: 41% - domestic abuse (1530 children); 40% - adult mental health (1500 children); 21% - adult drug misuse (784 children); and 18% - adult alcohol misuse (672 children).

It was noted that improving the conditions for vulnerable children across Somerset would be best achieved by improving the life chances of the most vulnerable fastest, and the new Family Safeguarding model would be trying to do that. The new way of working would be introduced in the Bridgwater and South Somerset areas first, as those areas had historically had higher numbers of families that would benefit from the new approach.

A range of measures would be used to support families including the motivational interview, which all staff would be trained to provide this including senior managers and Directors. This was designed to encourage and stimulate families to help themselves so they would feel inclined to willingly make changes rather than being told to do something.

It was explained that in Hertfordshire the number of children looked after had reduced, less children had experienced trauma, and more children remained with their birth family. The benefit would also be realised through prevention savings to Adult Services and reduced demand on emergency services such as the Police and NHS. In response to a question it was stated that it was a recognised practice model for effective family intervention, and assurance was provided that the ambition of the new approach could be achieved.

It was suggested and agreed that an update would be provided in 6

Claire Winter

months.	
Any other urgent items of business - Agenda item 8	Action
The Chair stated there were no other items of business and he closed the meeting at 12.54pm.	