

SCRUTINY FOR POLICIES, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee held in the Library Meeting Room, Taunton Library, on Friday 24 January 2020 at 10.00 am

Present: Cllr L Redman (Chair), Cllr R Williams (Vice-Chair), Cllr M Dimery, Cllr James Hunt, Cllr J Lock, Cllr W Wallace, Cllr J Williams. Mrs Ruth Hobbs and Mrs Eileen Tipper.

Other Members present: Cllr Chilcott, Cllr Davies, Cllr Leyshon, Cllr Munt and Cllr Nicholson.

Apologies for absence: Cllr N Hewitt-Cooper, Mr P Elliott and Ms Helen Fenn.

32 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

There were no declarations made.

33 Minutes from the previous meeting - Agenda Item 3

The Committee agreed that the minutes of the last meeting were an accurate record.

34 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

There were no questions asked, statements made, or petitions presented.

35 Scrutiny Work Programme - Agenda Item 5

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.

The Chair directed attention to the Committee's own work programme and invited suggestions for possible future agenda items.

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.

It was agreed to bring the Elective Home Education update forward to the March meeting.

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.

It was noted that the Outcome Tracker had been refreshed and updated and this was accepted.

36 **Medium Term Financial Plan for Children's Services - Agenda Item 6**

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 details of that process and revised indicative figures for 2020/21 and 2021/22 and looked further ahead to the financial year 2022/23.

It was noted that the MTFP Strategy had recognised the Council's declaration of a climate change emergency last February and that the Council was now working with partners to develop a Climate Emergency Strategy. When a strategy had been adopted, later in 2020, the Council would need a budget that would be flexible enough to reflect agreed priorities. Pending this climate 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 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 the Council last February and had been 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. The report also looked forward, reflecting future planned transformation and efficiency plans. Members noted the movements represented changes from the existing MTFP (2019-22) agreed last February and adhered to the key principle of ensuring robust, transparent budgets were set for future years. 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 a future 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.

37 **Family Safeguarding** - Agenda Item 7

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 capacity to assist 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 the way the Council currently operated needed to change if it was to continue to deliver and achieve its aims within the financial constraints/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.

Following a period of reduction in the preventative aspects of Children's Services there would now be a focus 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, to strengthen the whole family offer 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 several 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, including senior managers and Directors. This was designed to encourage and stimulate families to help themselves so they would feel inclined and willing to make changes rather than having to respond to being told to do something.

It was explained that in Hertfordshire, after the new approach had been introduced, the number of children looked after had reduced, less children had experienced trauma, and more children had been able to remain 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 Family Safeguarding was a recognised practice model for effective family intervention, and assurance was provided that the ambition of this new approach could be achieved. Members welcomed the update and thought it represented a positive development. It was suggested and agreed that an update would be provided in 6 months.

38 Any other urgent items of business - Agenda Item 8

The Chair stated there were no other items of business and he closed the meeting at 12.54pm.

(The meeting ended at 12.54 pm)

CHAIRMAN