

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 3 October 2022 at 1.00 pm

Present: Cllr O Patrick (Vice-Chair), Cllr J Baker (attended virtually), Cllr S Carswell, Cllr A Hadley, Cllr S Hart, Cllr B Height, Cllr J Hunt, Cllr E Potts-Jones, Cllr M Lovell, Cllr J Snell, Cllr K Pearce (substitute for Cllr Redman) and Cllr R Woods (substitute for Cllr Aujila)

R Hobbs, E Tipper and The Revd T Osmond - co-opted members

Other Members present: Cllr F Nicholson

Other Members present virtually: Cllr L Trimnell, Cllr C Ellis, Cllr A Dingwall, Cllr M Kravis, Cllr S Osborne and Cllr H Davies

Apologies for absence: Cllr L Redman (substituted by Cllr Pearce), Cllr S Aujla (substituted by R Woods) and Cllr J Kenton (no substitute). Apologies were also received from the Executive member, Cllr T Munt.

1 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

The following declaration of interest was made at the meeting: -

- (a) Ruth Hobbs – co-opted member – CEO Somerset Parent Carer Forum CIC (agenda item 9 refers)

2 Minutes from the previous meeting held on 5 September 2022 - Agenda Item 3

The minutes of the meeting held on Monday 5 September 2022 were approved and signed as a correct record.

3 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

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

4 Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee Work Programme - Agenda Item 5

The Committee considered and noted the Committee's current work programme and outcome tracker and the Executive's Forward Plan of planned key decisions in coming months.

It was agreed that: -

- The progress on Ofsted inspection action plan – would be detailed report and debate at the November meeting
- The detailed 2022 Key Stage assessment results for Somerset – add to January 2023 meeting
- The work plan and outcome tracker be updated.

In response to a query from Cllr Hunt about support for Ukrainian families and signposting, members were advised to contact B Strange, in the Public Health Team.

5 **Ofsted Inspection Result - Children's Social Care Services - update -** Agenda Item 6

The Committee received a verbal update from the Council's Deputy Director Children's Services, Claire Winter on the Inspection of Somerset local authority children's services. The Inspection of the Council's Children's Social Care services in July rated the services Good across the board and the inspection report was published on 21 September 2022. The report can be found on the following link – [Inspection of Somerset local authority children's services](#)

Members of the Committee congratulated the team and all those involved on this achievement.

Ms Winter highlighted the 2 recommendations in the report – namely placement sufficiency (which is also a national issue) and the take-up of return to home interviews and that this will be the main areas of focus in the action plan work.

The Committee will have the opportunity to have a more detailed discussion at its next meeting.

6 **Children's Services Budget Monitoring Report -** Agenda Item 8

This item was introduced by the Council's Assistant Director Inclusion, Dr Rob Hart who referred to the most recent budget monitoring report ([2022/23 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report – Month 4 – end July 2022](#)).

Dr Hart highlighted that the following: -

- the month 4 budget position for Children's Services is a £15.5m adverse variance against the budget (14.7% of service budget – a deterioration of £1.5m from month three
- the majority of this pressure is seen in the external placements budget (for children looked after) which is forecasting a £12.1m overspend
- the current projected adverse variance of £2.9m and the major cost pressures across Home to School and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) transport, the factors impacting on this such as rising

costs of fuel for example and the further work being done around the expected increase in pupil numbers which has also had a contributing factor to the overspend

The Committee: -

- (a) Noted the proposed actions to address the budget trajectory, including the Children's Transformation Programme, which focuses effort on key areas of demand / pressures.
- (b) Noted that the Executive has asked the Committee to review the 2022/23 budget monitoring position for its services and agreed that the Chair and Vice Chair will discuss further establishing a Task & Finish Group to look at the 'top spends', transport and external placements.

7 **Home to School Transport** - Agenda Item 7

Following the discussion on the budget position and the major cost pressures across Home to School and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) transport, the Committee received a PowerPoint presentation from the Council's Strategic Manager, Access & Additional Learning Needs Phil Curd and Service Manager Transporting Somerset John Perrett. They provided an overview of the Council's school transport duties, demand, growth of specialist places, transport organisation, costs, the significant challenges in the provision of home to school transport across Somerset and the development of a new School Travel Cost Management Strategy.

It was noted that a presentation had also been given at the Place Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 6 September 2022.

The Committee discussed the presentation, and the following questions and issues were raised and responded to, as follows: -

- Whether the public can travel on the home to school transport – unfortunately not possible and can only make a spare seat available to other children to use; the service does buy seats on some public routes; bus timetables are focussed to get pupils across the post 16 network
- Flagged that those who are dependent on the school transport service are unable to attend after school sessions, meaning vulnerable children are excluded – explained that have a statutory duty to transport to / from school and map the travel based on timings provided by the schools; if schools incorporated after school clubs in their school day it would be possible to adjust timings to allow attendance at the after school session; schools can also make own arrangements for those children who are detached from the school community
- Questions on the in house fleet – gave a flavour of the fleet in terms of recruitment of drivers and staff; have 93 vehicles, ranging from cars to coaches; a lot used for SEND transport; 50% of fleet used on school transport; have 5 coaches which are expensive to run; on the minibus

side, operate under a permit scheme (s19 permit), which means the service cannot make a profit or undertake commercial work / journeys but can recover full costs; have 5 depots to maintain and pay commercial price for maintenance; looking at possibility of maintenance being provided in house; mentioned recruitment of drivers issues; have 89 of vehicles on road at same time in the morning so squeezing everything out of the resources as possibly can; SEN transport is quite specialist – have not lost any operators but new operators are not coming through

- Mention that papers have not referred to post 16 transport and this needs to be included going forward
- Questions about bus buddies / independent travel trainers – this is administered through small team and are looking at expanding the team; special schools also looking at trying to deliver some of the independent travel training as part of the specialist curriculum, as part of transition to adulthood work
- Question about the policy – expecting the DfE to release its latest statutory guidance on school travel over the winter; have not released anything since 2014; when document comes out will undertake a review and update own policy; any changes would be subject to consultation
- Question about parents having a disability and being unable to transport their own children – mentioned that there is an ‘exceptional circumstances’ criteria and these are considered on a case-by-case basis; also undertake route safety assessments too
- Question about the slinky bus services – this is an on demand, responsive service across the county, to fill gap in public transport network; run in each district council areas (2 per area) and there are 11 vehicles currently; aimed at those who have no alternatives available to use; people have to be flexible and prioritise patient transport journey; runs 9 am – 5 pm; may also be used as a school bus; mention made about volunteer drivers used in social services and health mainly and not used generally in ‘normal’ home to school transport; are doing some work with the NHS to bring in more volunteer drivers; mentioned impact of fuel prices though
- Question about school admissions and school transport provision – clarified that schools follow the published admission arrangements when allocating school place and oversubscription issues; if the consequence of that means that the child has to go to another school and that school is over statutory walking distance, then as a local authority we step in vast touched your duty to ensure that child can attend a school that is suitable for them; however, if a parent chooses a school by preference which is neither the nearest or catchment school in Somerset, than it is for that parent to make their own transport arrangements.

On behalf of the Committee the Vice Chair thanked Dr Hart, Mr Curd and Mr Parrett for the detailed information.

It was agreed: -

- (a) to note the update and current position and proposed next steps and development
- (b) to add school transport to the Committee's work plan for refreshed Council policy (to reflect statutory guidance and possible discretionary changes)
- (c) the Chair and Vice Chair to discuss further a possible Task and Finish Group for SEND transport, to include provision for pre and post school club attendance, for example.

8 **SEND Draft Strategy and Development** - Agenda Item 9

This item was introduced by the Council's Assistant Director Inclusion Dr Rob Hart, and Strategic Manager, Commissioning, Vikki Hearn who outlined the on-going work in developing the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Strategy 2023-26.

Dr Hart and Ms Hearn explained that: -

- the strategy will set the priorities for SEND improvement following on from the Written Statement of Action (WSOA) period, due to be completed by the end of December 2022
- the priorities are evidence based and have been developed through extensive engagement, from the findings of the SEND Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), and taking into consideration the vast amount of research commissioned to better understand the needs of the SEND system
- the local area has conducted listening events, coffee morning and conversations with staff teams to gather their views on what the future priorities of the SEND strategy should be
- additionally, all engagement which has taken place throughout the life of the WSOA has been analysed and has contributed to the development of the emerging themes
- further engagement is planned over the next few weeks to refine the draft priorities followed by an 8-week consultation period.

The Committee then received a PowerPoint presentation from Ruth Hobbs, highlighting the key messages from the recent Somerset's SEND Annual Survey.

The Committee discussed the report and presentation, and the following questions and issues were raised and responded to, as follows: -

- question on capacity and how will achieve what set out in the Strategy – not everything can be a priority – need to be clear and specific (define) what can achieve and is deliverable; and having the right capacity in teams dealing with assessment referrals
- comments on the key messages from the annual survey, the sample size and the significant work undertaken, the collaborative outcome

meetings and the ambitions for children and young people – collected views in a variety of ways and outlined the consultation and where information had been collated; looking to build on work of Somerset Works / programme; reference to the work with The Unstoppables children and young people's group

- question about the number of statutory assessments coming in, where they are coming from and numbers which result in going to a Tribunal – clarified that the statutory assessment is the education health care plan which means there is a child who has support needs in education, possibly with health and social care need that are over and above what children would normally receive. Schools receive funding to put in place support for children with SEN and the majority of children with SEN will have those met from those resources, but a small proportion of children – about 4% of all children in Somerset – will need an education health care plan (EHCP); the majority of referrals come from schools; in last few years there has been an overall proportionate decline in referrals from parents and a proportionate increase in referrals from schools; referrals often come in the transition years (years 6-7); highlighted priority areas of need; Tribunal numbers and most common reason for appeal is around the placement (on the school named in the EHCP); costs including emotional costs to families mentioned; mentioned opening of new special free school in Martock in early 2024 for children with social management and health needs that will ultimately provide 120 places; mentioned the expansion of the Sky Academy in Taunton which caters for children with social, emotional, mental health needs; the Strategy will provide a clear plan around sufficiency / provision in the county in the future
- provided clarity on the new 'Free School' which is an Academy i.e., not a local authority school
- mention made about the role of other practitioners and resource in the system who can provide advice, guidance and support the aspiration of children and young people – will pick up the advice / guidance point in the Strategy; employment pathways and apprenticeships referred to (e.g., Avon and Somerset Police)
- comment about the issue of funding for SEND across country and that it is good to know that a lot is happening in Somerset

On behalf of the Committee the Vice Chair thanked Dr Hart, Ms Hearn and Ms Hobbs for the detailed information.

The Committee: -

- (a) Noted the following emerging SEND Strategy Themes which will be underpinned by a number of mission statements, outlining how these will be delivered, for consultation.

1. Listen, Hear and Respond - Children and young people with SEND and their families will be heard and feel they have choice and control about their lives. Not for me, with me.
2. Working Together and Coordinated - We are working together as a co-ordinated system and at the case level, around the family.
3. Getting Help as Early as Possible - Children, young people and their families are able to access the right support at the right time.
4. Access to the right information, support and provision - Children, young people and their families telling us: "I understand the support and provision that is available to me, and I can access it, if I need it."
5. Preparing for the future - Children and young people have the right skills and options, according to their individual needs, to take control of their future and achieve the ambitions important to them.

(b) Asked to see the final report from the Annual Survey when it is available.

(c) Asked that the consultation draft of the SEND Strategy be shared with the Committee

(d) That the SEND Strategy be brought back to the Committee after the consultation and engagement has concluded.

9 **Items for Information - Standing Item** - Agenda Item 10

The Vice Chair advised that at the last meeting he had requested some information about what is in place to address the impact of COVID on pupil / staff absences and school closures – the Committee noted that the detailed response provided had been shared with all members of the Committee.

10 **Any other urgent items of business** - Agenda Item 11

There were no other items of business.

(The meeting ended at 4.03 pm)

CHAIR