

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families held in the Sedgemoor Room, Bridgwater House, King Square, Bridgwater, TA6 3AR, on Wednesday, 15 November 2023 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Leigh Redman (Chair)
Cllr Evie Potts-Jones (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Suria Aujla
Cllr Andy Hadley
Cllr Martin Lovell
Cllr Jeny Snell
Ruth Hobbs - co-opted

Cllr Simon Carswell
Cllr John Hunt - attended remotely
Cllr Frances Nicholson
The Revd Tobie Osmond - co-opted
Joanne Simons - co-opted

In attendance:

Cllr Tessa Munt
Cllr Heather Shearer

Cllr Jo Roundell Greene

Other Members present remotely:

Cllr Helen Kay
Cllr Rosemary Woods

Cllr Andy Kendall

1 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Councillor Peter Clayton (no substitute) and Mrs Eileen Tipper (co-opted member).

2 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

There were no new declarations of interest made at the meeting.

3 Minutes of the Meeting held on 13 September 2023 - Agenda Item 3

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee - Childrens and Families held

on Wednesday 13 September 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

4 Minutes of the Joint Meeting held on 25 October 2023 - Agenda Item 4

Resolved that the minutes of the Joint Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee – Children & Families and the Scrutiny Committee – Adults & Health held on Wednesday 25 October 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

The minutes will also need to be confirmed by the Scrutiny Committee – Adults & Health.

5 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 5

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

6 Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families Work Programme - Agenda Item 6

The Committee received and noted the current work plan and outcome tracker and Executive Forward Plan.

The Chair highlighted the following:

- There is an additional meeting scheduled for Tuesday 12 December at 10 am at Brympton Way, Yeovil.
- To note that Committee Members will be invited to attend the Adults and Health Committee on 7 December for the following agenda item – Overview of Crime & Disorder.
- The outcome tracker on the vaping item, considered at the joint meeting on 25 October, should be ‘orange’ (rather than ‘green’) as there are still actions outstanding.
- To add ‘Connect Somerset’ as an item on the work plan.

7a 2023/24 Children's Services - Budget Monitoring

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from the Council’s Strategic manager, Finance Business Partnering, Sian Kenny on the 2023/24 Children’s Services budget as at month 5 and additionally provided a verbal update on the month 6 position.

Ms Kenny outlined that the 2023/24 Children’s Services (General Fund) has a net budget of £123.1m and has forecast overspend of £11.8m at the end of month 5 (9.6% of budget). The month 6 position is showing a slight increase, at £12.4m.

Ms Kenny highlighted the key pressures and key cost drivers, in relation to:

(a) external placements pressures (£10.1m overspend) (slides 3 – 4):

- unregistered placements £4.2m – although numbers are reducing, almost three quarters of the annual 2,190 budgeted placement days have been provided in the first 5 months of the financial year.
- residential placements £4.2m – increase in placements due to complexity of children, moves from unregistered placements and lack of sufficiency within fostering both internally and in the external market.

(b) Home to school SEND Transport (£1.7m) (slide 5):

- demand for SEND Transport has doubled since 2018 - significant factor is the rise in number of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) attending a school other than their local mainstream setting.
- passenger costs increasing by 10%.
- increasing cost of contracted supply.

The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) which has £15.6m forecast in year deficit; cumulative £37.5m deficit (slide 6) and Ms Kenny highlighted the key cost drivers – High Needs Block and the Schools Block (slide 7).

The Committee asked a number of questions and made a number of comments which were responded to at the meeting, as follows:

- *how and where is the DSG reported* – this is reported in the Schools Forum and to the Executive in the regular budget monitoring reports – there are 3 sections to this report. The DSG is a ring-fenced grant which is allocated in four blocks (Schools, Early Years, High Needs, central Schools Services). The key risks in the High Needs Block are increased demand for EHCP's, sufficiency of provision of social, emotional and mental health support.
- *Position regarding LA maintained schools revenue budgets / reserves* – these reserves are regarded as being under the control of the individual schools and not the local authority and are therefore not included in the calculation of the overall DSG reserves.
- *Detail on slide 2* – confirmed information is correct, including areas reporting '0.0' variances. The committee still needs to see the budget information across all lines (e.g. fostering & permanence; leaving care) to show the full position.
- *Explanation of difference between 'mainstream home to school transport' and 'SEND transport' (statutory / non statutory elements).*

Claire Winter, the Council's Executive Director, Children, Families and Education explained that 'mainstream' is essentially children being transported to / from school, as the closest school with an available place is further away than the

statutory walking distance for their age or it's deemed as an unsafe walking route to school or to pupils from low-income families (in certain circumstances). This budget is easier to predict and is relatively stable as not many children move school during a school year.

With regard to SEND transport, if a child is of statutory age and has an EHCP the local authority has a statutory duty to in law to provide travel assistance if they attend the nearest, appropriate school for their age and needs and live beyond the statutory walking distance for their age (there are certain exceptions). The budget costs vary more as there is greater movement / fluctuation with this cohort as pupils move from mainstream provision to special provision, new assessments come in and so on and some pupils will require single person transport provision.

The Committee discussed what information will be provided to the December meeting, and when this will be provided, so the Committee can use its time in best way. The Chair advised that he has written to the Executive for clarity on expectations.

A key area of deficit is the DSG, High Needs Block and the next update will include more detail on this and the 2 areas overspending.

The Chair thanked officers for their work and the Committee noted the update.

7b **Update on Children's Transformation Programme / Business Plan**

The Committee received a presentation from Caroline Barnes, the Council's Children's Services Transformation Project Manager and Claire Winter, the Council's Executive Director, Children, Families and Education on the [Children's Transformation Programme / Business Plan](#).

Ms Barnes outlined the Children's Services transformation priorities, which are:

- Sufficiency – ensuring that have enough resources to predict demand and to manage the needs of our most vulnerable children within the available budget.
- Efficiency – making the best use of the resources we have, ensuring focus on agreed priorities and providing value for money.
- Managing risks – taking decisive and timely action to prevent crisis for children and/or deterioration in the services children need.

The four strategies / strands underpinning the Children's Services transformation priorities 2023 – 2026 (slide 9) are – Education for Life, CLA Transformation, SEND Strategy, and Connect Somerset. Ms Barnes provided information and some

examples of what sufficiency, efficiency and managing risk will look like (slides 10 – 12).

The Committee asked a number of questions and made a number of comments which were responded to at the meeting, as follows:

- *Key theme is prevention how keep people with high needs in mainstream school* - noted this is an item on the agenda for next meeting of the Committee; also around how support schools better to support children with EHCPs or special educational needs in the mainstream and referenced the Education Finance consultation (agenda item 8 below).
- *Role of housing, housing allocation and the schools children attend not being a consideration* – agreed that housing is critical and officers have asked ‘Research in Practice’, a national organisation, to deliver training in the new year to adults, children’s and housing teams to help working together / better understanding of each other’s roles – and develop a toolkit around housing / adults / children’s services.
- Now that are ‘one Council’ should be easier to connect things.
- *Not sure there is a lot of awareness in schools about Connect Somerset and needs to be some work done about awareness raising* – noted – the Committee would also benefit from further information on it and has been added to the work plan.

The Chair asked that committee members think further on the four areas / strategies underpinning the Children’s Services transformation priorities namely – Education for Life; CLA Transformation; SEND Strategy; Connect Somerset – and that at the next meeting on 12 December, will seek volunteers for the areas to allow individual meetings with officers to gain a better understanding of a topic of interest. The Chair clarified that he is not looking for a topic expert but is hoping that members would volunteer to learn more about one of the areas and from that knowledge, feedback to committee and it will hopefully support a better scrutiny.

The Chair thanked officers for the presentation and the Committee noted the update.

8 Education Finance - consultation - Agenda Item 8

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from Claire Winter, the Council’s Executive Director, Children, Families and Education on the Education Finance consultation on how can meet education funding challenges in Somerset,.

The consultation concluded on 10 November 2023 and there had been 346 responses to the consultation survey. The Committee discussed the areas which it is

proposed will be developed further into detailed, costed options for consultation.

The areas were:

1. Funding for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) – upfront funding, equalising banding, pupil budgets.
2. Early Help funding proposal.
3. Options for Early Years.
4. Minimum Funding Guarantee (MFG) – this question was aimed at schools and the outcome will be discussed further by the Schools Forum.

The Committee asked a number of questions and made a number of comments which were responded to at the meeting, as follows:

- *Parents / carers / public had responded to the question aimed at schools (MFG) and the outcome to the option had been close - this was noted and will be reflected on.*
- *Early Help, funding and impact on workforce - will be whole system perspective and referenced the Early Help 5-year funding proposal (slide 13).*
- *ECHP and upfront funding and whether this is feasible - it is not LA funding and is around using the grant differently and how assess the amount each school will get – business intelligence / modelling work needs to be undertaken, and then understand how should allocate that funding up front for each school - will be a strong QA approach.*
- *Percentage of responses from early years settings – this information can be broken down.*
- *Seems to be some element of ‘unclarity’ in the responses to the survey – are officers comfortable with what have – this is in 2 areas – (a) personal budget question / pupil funding) – are fairly confident that was misunderstood and have reflected on the use of language used and will rework this along with the Parent Carer Forum to talk to parents in a different way and have a more direct conversation about it and what it means; (b) MFG questions – this was a very technical question and was well described and schools understood it and the public were able to respond to it as well. Officers are confident the responses received are adequate.*

Officers stressed that this consultation is only about finding out which of these options are a good idea to look at further and that nothing will change for schools or families without a further consultation that gives a lot more detail about how an option would work.

The Chair reminded the Committee that the next meeting has an item on SEND / EHCP and it would be helpful to have clarification in that item on ‘banding’ which had been referenced in the presentation (slide 7).

The Committee thanked officers for the presentation and the Committee noted the update.

9 Standing Panel for Education Standards - update from Panel Chair - Agenda Item 9

The Committee received an update from the Chair of the [Education Standards Panel](#), Cllr Evie Potts-Jones. The first, introductory meeting had been held on 26 October 2023. Going forward the Panel will recommend items or certain data for the Scrutiny Committee to discuss.

The Committee welcomed and noted the update.

10 Items for Information - Standing Item - Agenda Item 10

The Committee noted the following items for information:

- (a) SSCP Learning Bulletin - September 2023 – circulated on 20 September 2023
- (b) Children & Young People LGA bulletin – September 2023 – circulated in 28 September 2023
- (c) Link to the consultation on ‘creating a smoke free generation and tackling youth vaping’, which runs to 6 December - [Creating a smokefree generation and tackling youth vaping: your views - Department of Health and Social Care \(dhsc.gov.uk\)](#) – circulated on 30 October 2023
- (d) Link to [NHS dental statistics for England 2022-23, Annual Report](#) - circulated on 30 October 2023
- (e) Information on the Education Finance consultation – circulated on 1 November 2023
- (f) LA maintained schools core offer – update – circulated on 6 November 2023

(The meeting ended at 12.07 pm)

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CHAIR