

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, 10 January 2024 at 10.00 am

**Present:**

Cllr Evie Potts-Jones (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Simon Carswell

Cllr Pauline Ham

Cllr Marcus Kravis

Cllr Frances Nicholson

Cllr Brian Smedley (sub for Cllr Redman)

Cllr Rosemary Woods (sub for Cllr Aujla)

Jo Simons – co-opted attended remotely

Cllr Peter Clayton

Cllr John Hunt – attended remotely

Cllr Martin Lovell

Cllr Gill Slocombe (sub for Cllr Hadley)

Cllr Jeny Snell

The Revd Tobie Osmond – co-opted

**In attendance:**

Cllr Heather Shearer

**Other Members present remotely:**

Cllr Norman Cavill

Cllr Liz Leyshon

Cllr Lucy Trimnell

Cllr Andy Kendall

Cllr Jo Roundell Greene

Cllr Sarah Wakefield

**Councillor Evie Potts-Jones (Vice Chair) - in the Chair**

**1 Membership changes - Agenda Item**

The Vice-Chair updated the Committee on recent membership changes:-

- (a) Cllr Pauline Ham and Cllr Marcus Kravis have been appointed as members on the Committee, replacing Cllr Caroline Ellis and Cllr Jenny Kenton.
- (b) Mrs Eileen Tipper, longstanding co-opted member on the Committee has taken the difficult decision to stand down from the role. The Vice Chair said that she is a remarkable person and is extremely grateful for the time given to the work of

the committee over the years and will forward on the Committees' thanks and best wishes to her.

The Vice Chair read out the following statement from the Chair – *“Eileen has been an amazing, co-opted member of the committee, she has been there as long as I have, always ready to challenge or delve, her knowledge, background and willingness to question or challenge has been so valuable to me and the committee over the years. I thank her for her service and support to me. Her experience will be missed by the committee, I really do thank her”*.

## **2 Apologies for Absence** - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Cllr Leigh Redman (substituted by Cllr Brian Smedley), Cllr Andy Hadley (substituted by Cllr Gill Slocombe), Cllr Suria Aujla (substituted by Cllr Rosemary Woods) and Ruth Hobbs (co-opted member). Cllr John Hunt and Jo Simons (co-opted member) joined the meeting online.

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

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

Cllr Pauline Ham – personal interests – (a) family member works for the Leaving Care Team; (b) family member who works for the NUT.

## **4 Minutes from the meeting held on Tuesday 12 December 2023** - Agenda Item 3

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee - Childrens and Families held on Tuesday 12 December 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

Referring to Minute 7 (EHCP- progress update), the Vice Chair advised that Cllr Nicholson had sent in her questions – confirmed that the responses are being collated and will be shared with the committee and will be published.

## **5 Public Question Time** - Agenda Item 4

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

## **6 Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families Work Programme** - Agenda Item 5

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

The Scrutiny Manager highlighted the following:

- The item on children's mental health / self-harm will be considered at the March meeting.
- To note that the Annual Report of the Director of Public Health will be considered by the Adults & Health Scrutiny Cttee at their meeting on 8 February (an item for information).
- The MTFP will be on the agenda for the Corporate & Resources Scrutiny Cttee meeting on 1 February and all scrutiny members will be invited to attend the meeting. Implications / issues for this committee can be brought to following meeting.
- The next meeting of the Committee is on 13 March 2024, and will be held in the JMR at Deane House, Taunton.

## **7 Sufficiency Strategy for children looked after and care leavers – 2023-28 - Agenda Item 6**

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from Richard Selwyn, the Council's Service Director Children's Commissioning and Julie Breeze, Commissioner – Children in Care on the [Sufficiency Strategy for children looked after and care leavers \(2023-28\)](#) who provided an outline of the Sufficiency Strategy for Somerset, the vision, priorities, Somerset challenges and the programme to improve outcomes and sufficiency / actions to be taken.

Ms Breeze explained the sufficiency means ensuring there are enough high quality homes for our children in care and care leavers. The vision is to:

- Better support children at risk of coming into care, before they come into care.
- Increase the number of homes for children, especially foster care.
- Design our in-house fostering, residential care and supported accommodation so we support the most complex needs.
- Improve choice and match homes to children, significantly reducing out of county places.
- Reduce costs so we are within budget.

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

- *Asked about the processes for recruiting foster carers* – this is done creatively, to help show that this is something people can do; there is a financial element but it is about focussing on and being clear about what the offer is and the level of support / training on offer.
- *Query about the 'new generation of carers' point and what means* – advised that in the pandemic a number of younger carers had come forward but had returned to other work and stopped caring when the pandemic ended – have reviewed fees

and allowances, for example.

- *Would encourage everyone to look into fostering; have found it a rewarding experience and age is not a barrier; you are part of a team and are supported.*
- *Supported housing provision for the rising 16 – 24 year olds is a huge issue – recognise this is an issue and do work closely with housing colleagues and long term strategy and are exploring a rent guarantor scheme for our children in care and care leavers.*
- *Helpful to see information (movement) on numbers of foster carers – officers are happy to provide this information.*
- *Question about therapeutic education provision, part of Homes and Horizons project (providing homes for the most complex children in care) – explained the complex funding mechanisms and the ongoing conversations with the DfE around the model which has to be signed-off at Ministerial level; expect this to happen soon. It is hoped that the therapeutic education provision at Misterton will be opened in April and the Head Teacher has been in place since September and staff are working with the young people already who need that support. Officers also updated on progress on Homes and Horizons, which is providing homes for the most complex children in care and is successful and a genuine partnership; are planning for homes 7 and 8 and putting finance in place for further homes.*
- *Query on Somerset challenges (slide 6) and the ‘increase in unregistered / illegal placements’ and what this means; – clarified that ‘illegal’ means an unregistered placement; explained the process / safeguards if do have to use an unregistered setting (due to, for example, there being no other provider able or willing to take the young person).*
- *Query about comment on rising number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (USAC) (slide 6) – explained this is being managed well and are working hard with providers on this.*
- *Question on ‘shape and manage the market’ (slide 7) – looking at how engage the market and referenced the dynamic purchasing system which will help and QA check any new provider.*
- *Query and concern about inflation negotiations (referenced on slide 7) and commissioning arrangements (slide 8) – referenced the contractual framework and discussions with providers; if a provider is not on contractual framework, it is a laborious process / discussion; the market is very difficult at the moment; always trying to engage on national level too.*

The Vice Chair briefly summarised the discussions at the meeting – recognise the need to find the right quality home for children and young people; one of the key areas is around preventing children & young people from coming into care in first instance; foster care recruitment, which is a national as well as a Somerset challenge; highlighted the increase in the number of children with complex needs; housing issues and work with providers; fostering data to provided.

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

## **8 2023/24 Children's Services - Budget Monitoring - Agenda Item 7**

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from Christian Evans, the Council's Head of Business Partnering Finance and colleagues on the 2023/24 Children's Services month 7 budget monitoring position. The presentation focussed on external placements monitoring and forecasting, CLA key cost drivers and the 23/24 DSG budget monitoring (High Needs, home to school transport and SEND transport).

Mr Evans explained that the discussion on the previous agenda item on the Sufficiency Strategy for Somerset had provided good context to this item.

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

- *Query about the High Needs (HN) deficit (slide 8)* – there is a programme of work going on to look at mitigations around reversing the deficit on the HN block and to return the in year overspends to zero; there is also the national context (problem) and Somerset is not 'out of line'; the government put in place two different types of activity in place and Somerset is in tranche 1 of the Delivering Better Value project; have done work with Newton Europe but this work is very unlikely to reduce the deficit to zero entirely.; referenced the Deficit Management Plan which will be brought to scrutiny so can understand what are proposing.

Highlighted the main issue and concern that the deficit is effectively underwritten by the government but from 2026 the government is planning to essentially stop underwriting the HN deficit, which will have a huge financial impact on this authority, and probably nearly every upper tier authority in the country.

- *Ms Simons, who represents the Schools Forum on the committee mentioned that the Schools Forum is involved in the HN discussions and will update the committee on these discussions.*
- *Question on the CLA key cost drivers (slide 7) and volatility in charges / costs in sector* – this is due to several sort of different pressures and drivers in the system and some of the drivers are – needs and complexity, long term effects of covid, cost of living crisis, practical changes, working hard at all levels of the system, commissioning changes, the market trajectory and effects on availability in the market place, lack of sufficiency in fostering which means using more residential care and hence the importance of the work to increase the number of foster carers and keep improving both quality as well as reducing the overall cost.

The Vice Chair briefly summarised the discussions at the meeting – data driven, budget monitoring, cost drivers, noting that the council is refreshing the DSG Deficit Management Plan (DMP) and will bring this to scrutiny committee in March so the committee can see what is being proposed.

The Vice Chair thanked officers for the presentation and the Committee noted budget position.

## **9 Update on short break provision (respite) - Agenda Item 8**

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from Louise Palmer, the Council's Strategic Commissioner, Children's Services and Jo Manning, Head of Service on short break provision, which is holiday activities, daycare, fostering, residential and outlined the statutory guidance, current resources, gaps / opportunities, vision and plans for the future / next steps.

They referred to the 'sprint' held in December which highlighted the issues which needed to be addressed (for example, process to get short breaks is too long, transport, workforce). The aim is to re-design the assessment process to be faster and to increase access to local resources so that needs can be met nearer, faster. The action plan will be finalised during January with fortnightly meetings to progress and will return to the committee in May to provide an update.

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

- *Change in mindset and paid tribute to the amazing work of families / parents; are there cost implications in what is being proposed* – there will be cost implications and when come back with proposals will look at cost implications of doing, or not doing things. The 'sprint' is a good process and the families said that the current process feels adversarial and it is a 'fight' and want to have more flexible local support so likely to see right level of support, to help families when they need it and want to improve what families experience and reduce costs too. For example, dealing with complaints takes time and resources (tribunals) so having fewer may be able to get more money into the right place.
- *Query on the micro providers mentioned on the workforce slide (slide 11)* – clarified are in the Adult Social Care Team and are independent of the Council and provide support to adults in the community – asked if they could work in children's service as well – and are doing a lot of work with them to dispel myths.

Officers explained the position re the children's homes for respite - have retained the home for children with mild physical or learning difficulties and one for children with very complex learning difficulties, which is very close to the hospital in case

they need urgent medical treatment. The decision was taken to close a third home (Beech Tree) (for children with complex needs, particularly autism) and work going forward is to have some smaller homes, creating a more home-like environment.

- *Pulling these actions together (slide 13) and local provision; comment made that need to have joined up working across the organisation and to ensure that all parts of the council are supporting this approach and not letting people get away with doing something that does not help children.*

The Vice Chair thanked officers for the informative presentation. It was agreed that the Action Plan is shared with Scrutiny and officers were asked to provide an update to the Committee in May.

## **10 Education Place Planning - Agenda Item 9**

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from Phil Curd, the Council's Head of Education Places on education place planning. He provided an overview of statutory duties, the Somerset context, projection modelling, education growth and challenges, local first approach, developer contributions, extended / expanded childcare offer and expansion of wrap around provision.

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

- *Question on pupil yields and SEND figure of 0.92 children per 100 homes (slide 7) - the calculation was explained; 2% of school aged children are in specialist provision and the yield data had been recalculated recently and is accurate. When looking at developing school places the approach is the local first approach (slide 8).*
- *Query on yield data (slide 7) - some housing developments have not yielded numbers and some areas of the county such as West Somerset have surplus number of school places.*
- *Developed contributions (slide 9) and is the council making best / ensure that education gets the money it needs - the current challenge is securing the contributions we need; are streamlining the planning process and LGR provides a big opportunity, to amalgamate 4 teams and for a single approach to priority areas; this is an emerging situation but an enormous step forward; the new Somerset wide local plan too is being developed. Detailed work is also on going in the council around developer contributions via s106 process.*
- *Expansion of wrap around provision (slide 18) and how can increase numbers of schools offering after school provision until 6 pm - this is around having sufficient economies of scale and is a challenge. Are more likely to see after school provision being available in more urban areas (where families tend to live closer to the school) than in rural areas (and transport is an issue), so its around*

viability (demand) and rural nature (transport).

The Vice Chair thanked the officer for the excellent presentation and the committee noted the update.

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

The Committee noted the following items for information:-

(a) Housing related support and accommodation for 16 – 25-year-olds - the new service will go live in April 2024

(b) C&YP December Bulletin – circulated on 19 December 2023

**(The meeting ended at 1.16 pm)**

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**CHAIR**