

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families held in the John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton TA1 1HE, on Wednesday, 26 June 2024 at 10.00 am

Present:

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

Cllr Peter Clayton
Cllr Pauline Ham

Cllr John Hunt
Cllr Frances Nicholson
Rev'd Tobie Osmond – co-opted member

Cllr Andy Hadley
Cllr Henry Hobhouse (substitute for Cllr Martin Lovell)
Cllr Marcus Kravis
Cllr Jeny Snell
Ruth Hobbs – co-opted member (attended remotely)

In attendance:

Cllr Heather Shearer

Other Members present remotely:

Cllr Andy Kendall

Cllr Sarah Wakefield

1 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Councillor M Lovell (substituted by Cllr H Hobhouse), Cllr S Carswell and J Simons (co-opted member).

2 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

No additional interests, new or updated declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

3 Minutes from the Meeting held on Wednesday 15 May 2024 - Agenda Item 3

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee - Childrens and Families held on Wednesday 15 May 2024 be confirmed as a correct record.

4 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

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

5 Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families Work Programme - Agenda Item 5

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

The Chair highlighted that the Regional Schools Commissioner will be invited to attend a meeting to discuss academisation and the process for school conversions – it is hoped this will be the August meeting but if this is not possible, it will be as soon as can be arranged. The Executive Director said that she will prepare a briefing note for the Committee on the decision-making process / procedure for academisation.

6 Children's Services Transformation Plan (deep dive) - Agenda Item 6

The Chair welcomed the following to the meeting for this agenda item - C Winter - Executive Director of Children, Families and Education, A Walker – Service Director – Education, R Selwyn – Service Director – Commissioning & Performance and J Shelbourn-Barrow- Service Director – Children & Families.

The Committee received a [presentation](#) on the Children's Transformation Programme, which provided an update / summary on progress, overarching finance summary and MTFP tracker and a detailed update on the work of the priority workstreams. The Executive Director explained that the vision is that 'Somerset's children and young people grow up in a safe, child friendly county that supports them to be happy, healthy and prepared for adulthood.'

The priority workstreams are:-

- Local mainstream school is the right choice for most children
- Developing an excellent workforce for children
- Families can access support early
- Sufficient homes for children in care and school places for children with additional needs in Somerset

The Committee discussed the progress update, asked a number of questions and made a number of comments, which were responded to at the meeting:-

- requested an explanation about the delays to Homes and Horizons homes 6 to 8, which is extremely concerning – *explained that there is funding but are a number of reasons for the delays; there had been three externally commissioned evaluations of the project's value for money of Homes & Horizons last year which placed a delay on progressing two of them; some capacity issues within the LA (planning officers, and property team also very stretched); ground conditions and planning requirements and third-party delays; doing all can to deliver as soon as possible.*
- workforce turnover, number of social workers, and concerns about morale in some teams – *there is a national problem around social worker recruitment and is a very difficult market as there are not enough newly qualified social workers coming through; mentioned that the degree programme for social working in Yeovil college has a fallow year as there are not enough young people coming in who want to take a social work degree; are keeping eye of the case loads of social workers; pressure in system (HR capacity for example); social worker staff*

turnover is low here and if staff do leave they tend to either leave the profession entirely or move into locum work; mention of the work around recruitment and retention of social workers; in the education sector, there are 'pinch areas' in the workforce, such as senior leadership team; looking at supported pathways / alternative routes in teaching; also mention made about the education restructure, and have corporate agreement that consultation can commence in September.

- *recruitment of foster carers – aim is to have 10 net additional foster carers in each of next 3 years and are on target to achieve this; will also review the foster carers comms / campaign to ensure it remains effective; are part of the regional fostering hub and undertake regional advertising.*
- *the workstream 'local mainstream school is right choice for most children' – query about what 'most children' means – explained that 'most' means the vast majority and recognising that some need specialist provision.*
- *social care case management system roll out to external partners is exciting – will really help to have 1 case management system across system.*
- *during the discussion on data sharing and the roll-out of Transform Family View on Azure platform, which is enabling more data sharing and insight, it was agreed that data sharing ('how it works'), will be added to the work plan.*
- *reference to the Thrive16+ support to young people (preventing homelessness accommodation) - the 2 YMCA's are main providers and it is going well; there are challenges especially due to the lack of move-on accommodation; members are welcome to visit if wish and relevant contact information will be circulated.*

The Committee thanked officers for the excellent and informative update.

7 Education, Health & Care Plan process and annual reviews - Agenda Item 7

The Chair welcomed the Council's Service Director – Education, A Walker and Head of SEND, C Merchant-Jones to the meeting for this agenda item.

Further to the meeting in [December 2023](#), the Committee received a [presentation](#) which provided an update on the Education, Health & Care Plan (EHCP) process and annual reviews. Ms Walker and Ms Merchant-Jones highlighted the following:

- the percentage of school aged children with EHC plans has continued to grow and 5% of school aged children have an EHC plan.
- the rate of EHC plan issued within 20-weeks has reduced, owing to recruitment and retention issues and high number who had 'become stuck' in the assessment process.
- work and focus on those children 'stuck in the system,' to make sure looking for a placement able to meet needs, which is supporting more effective and timely decision making
- tribunals and concern about trajectory still and so are looking at practice and policy – annual planning meetings offered to every school across Somerset to identify children requiring support from specialist LA teams; clarify expectations with schools to ensure that appropriate advice and support in advance of meeting; additional staff in place to process annual review reports in a timely way.
- the transformation work and redesign of team around the school.
- challenges - system barriers; redesigning internal process; technology; capacity in the team remains a challenge and high turnover of staff.

The Committee discussed the update, asked a number of questions and made a number of comments, which were responded to at the meeting:-

- data and system barriers requiring corporate support to change (slide 9) - *explained its around systems and having a good agile recording system. There are several system in children's services and historically, the education one is not working well and this is a significant block – are investigating a different system which would be integrated with the social care system and are doing some work around financial aspects / due diligence.*
- question about the decrease in number of plans maintained by the Council following the focussed effort on ceasing plans undertaken in January and how this impacted on compliance and any knock on effect – *do not believe it had a disproportionate effect on other parts of the system – just recognise that need to focus efforts on ceasing EHC plans where they are no longer necessary. Will follow this up to discuss outside the meeting.*
- question about the 'success rate' at tribunals – *when look at the data and the sharp increase, driving us to ask the question about the process and for there to be a graduated (measured) process – a detailed response will be circulated with the minutes.*
- disappointment that the presentation had been provided late.
- what does 'reducing conflict in system' mean – *when the process goes well, it's a process where professionals and parents come together and come up with a plan that is going to help the child progress better than they would otherwise have done; no conflict and should feel quite positive and afford feedback; this is not a universal experience.; have a graduated response tool and its about following process through.*
- smaller early years settings can struggle in getting assessments done – *had positive meeting with Early Years providers and agreed it is about getting things in place early; process and communication is key and speed and effectiveness of support too.*

The Committee thanked the officers for the update.

8 Children's Services - Budget Monitoring - Agenda Item 8

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from the Council's Head of Finance Business Partnering, C Evans who provided an update on the budget position. This covered the provisional 2023/24 outturn position for Children, Families & Education Services (£12.4m adverse overspend - the overspend predominantly relates to external placements, fieldwork (support for children at home), and SEND transport); and the 2024/25 emerging issues for Children's Services.

The main area of concern for 2024/25 relates to Children Looked After, which is showing a potential £3.9m overspend; forecast pressure on education & school transport budget and mitigations in place; the Dedicated Schools Budget (DSB), with a £4.2m pressure on the budget deficit of £18.9m for 24/25 and the statutory override due to end in 2025, when the deficit will need to be offset against the council reserves.

The Committee discussed the update, asked a number of questions and made a number of comments, which were responded to at the meeting:-

- query when the committee will receive more detail on the Qtr. 1 figures;

frustration as the committee needs to see the detail to be able to fully scrutinise it and do need to see the very latest financial information available – *the finance team resources are very stretched however given the challenging financial position a more detailed budget monitoring exercise was undertaken in month 2 and Qtr. 1 figures will be reported in August.*

- Query about 'unregistered' placements and what means – *clarified that 'unregistered' provision is where it should be regulated (by Ofsted) but has not been; an emergency placement is a placement that is registered by Ofsted to provide placements in an emergency.*
- question about the increase in children looked after– *have looked at quarterly information from southeast and the southwest bench marking groups and it is an issue in both those areas – Somerset has a low proportion of children in care and although it is increasing it is not increasing at a greater rate than other areas. The Transformation Board has agreed to do a 'deep dive' review at this, to try to understand the reasons behind the increase in numbers. This will be shared with the Committee.*

The Committee acknowledged the hard work involved and thanked officers for the update presentation.

9 Items for Information - Standing Item - Agenda Item 9

The Committee noted the following item for information:

- (a) The [SENDIAS Annual Report](#) – circulated on 11 June 2024

The next meeting of the Committee is scheduled to be held on Monday 5 August 2024 at 1.30 pm.

(The meeting ended at 12.27 pm)

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CHAIR