



Notice of Meeting of

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Wednesday, 18 September 2024 at 10.00 am

Sedgemoor Room, Bridgwater House, King Square, Bridgwater, TA6 3AR

To: The members of the Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families

Chair: Councillor Leigh Redman
Vice-chair: Councillor Evie Potts-Jones

Councillor Jason Baker	Councillor Simon Carswell
Councillor Peter Clayton	Councillor Andy Hadley
Councillor Pauline Ham	Councillor Alistair Hendry
Councillor John Hunt	Councillor Marcus Kravis
Councillor Martin Lovell	Councillor Frances Nicholson
Councillor Jeny Snell	Ruth Hobbs – co-opted
The Revd Tobie Osmond – co-opted	

For further information about the meeting, including how to join the meeting virtually, please contact Democratic Services on (01823) 357628 or email: democraticservicesteam@somerset.gov.uk.

All members of the public are welcome to attend our meetings and ask questions or make a statement **by giving advance notice** in writing or by e-mail to the Monitoring Officer at email: democraticservicesteam@somerset.gov.uk by **5pm on Thursday, 12 September 2024**.

This meeting will be open to the public and press, subject to the passing of any resolution under the Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A: Access to Information.

The meeting will be webcast and an audio recording made.
Issued by (the Proper Officer) on Tuesday, 10 September 2024

AGENDA

Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families 10.00 am Wednesday, 18 September 2024

Public Guidance Notes contained in Agenda Annexe (Pages 5 - 6)

Information about the Scrutiny Committee - Children & Families (Pages 7 - 8)

Details on how to join the meeting online (Pages 9 - 10)

1 Apologies for Absence

To receive any apologies for absence.

2 Declarations of Interest

To receive and note any declarations of interests in respect of any matters included on the agenda for consideration at this meeting.

(The other registrable interests of Councillors of Somerset Council, arising from membership of City, Town or Parish Councils and other Local Authorities will automatically be recorded in the minutes: [City, Town & Parish Twin Hatters - Somerset Councillors 2023](#))

3 Minutes from the Meeting held on Wednesday 7 August 2024 (Pages 11 - 18)

To approve the minutes from the previous meeting held on Wednesday 7 August 2024.

4 Public Question Time

The Chair to advise the Committee of any items on which members of the public have requested to speak and advise those members of the public present of the details of the Council's public participation scheme.

For those members of the public who have submitted any questions or statements, please note, a three minute time limit applies to each speaker and you will be asked to speak before Councillors debate the issue.

We are now live webcasting most of our committee meetings and you are welcome to view and listen to the discussion. The link to each webcast will be available on the meeting webpage, please see details under 'click here to join online meeting'.

5 Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families Work Programme (Pages 19 - 28)

To receive an update from the Service Manager, Governance Scrutiny. To assist the discussion, the following documents are attached:-

- (a) The Committee's work programme
- (b) The Committee's outcome tracker

Please use the following links to view the latest Somerset Council Forward Plans and Executive Forward Plan of planned key decisions that have been published on the Council's website:

[Somerset Council Forward Plans](#)

[Somerset Council Executive Forward Plan](#)

6 Children's Services - Budget Monitoring - Month 4 (Pages 29 - 38)

To consider PowerPoint presentation.

Note – the Chair will allow 15 minutes for this agenda item.

7 Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) of Somerset - serious youth violence - action plan (To Follow)

To consider PowerPoint presentation.

Notes - The Chair will allow 40 minutes for this agenda item. There will be an extraordinary meeting of the SSCP to finalise the JTAI plan and the presentation will be available to circulate on 16 September.

8 Transformation Board - deep dive - Children Looked After (Pages 39 - 52)

To consider PowerPoint presentation.

Note – the Chair will allow 30 minutes for this agenda item.

9 Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Group (Pages 53 - 60)

To receive and note the Report from the meeting of the Joint Scrutiny Group held on 25 July 2024 and the current Terms of Reference.

Note – the Chair will allow 10 minutes for this agenda item.

10 External placements - update on recommendations made by the Task and Finish Group (Pages 61 - 64)

To consider update.

Note – the Chair will allow 10 minutes for this agenda item.

11 Standing Panel for Education Standards - update

To receive update from the Service Director, Education and the Chair of the Panel, Councillor E Potts-Jones.

Note – the Chair will allow 5 minutes for this agenda item.

12 SWAP Audit on EHCP Improvement

Introduction from Service Director, Education – the full proposal and action plan will be brought to the October meeting of the Committee

Note - the Chair will allow 10 minutes for this agenda item.

13 Items for Information - Standing Item

This is a standing agenda item and will provide details of information sent to Committee members in between meetings, that cover the Committee's policy areas.

- (a) 2023 KS4 and KS2 outcomes / performance for each MAT – circulated on 8 August 2024
- (b) [Somerset Council Engagement and Participation AR for 2023-2024](#) – circulated on 12 August 2024

If Committee members have any questions or comments on the information, please contact the Committee Administrator on democraticserviceteam@somerset.gov.uk in the first instance and before the date of the meeting.

Guidance notes for the meeting

Council Public Meetings

The legislation that governs Council meetings requires that committee meetings are held face-to-face. The requirement is for members of the committee and key supporting officers (report authors and statutory officers) to attend in person, along with some provision for any public speakers. Provision will be made wherever possible for those who do not need to attend in person including the public and press who wish to view the meeting to be able to do so virtually.

Inspection of Papers - any person wishing to inspect minutes, reports, or the background papers for any item on the agenda should contact Democratic Services at democraticserviceteam@somerset.gov.uk or telephone 01823 357628. They can also be accessed via the council's website on [Committee structure - Modern Council \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

Members' Code of Conduct requirements

When considering the declaration of interests and their actions as a councillor, Members are reminded of the requirements of the Members' Code of Conduct and the underpinning Principles of Public Life: Honesty; Integrity; Selflessness; Objectivity; Accountability; Openness; Leadership. The Code of Conduct can be viewed at: [Code of Conduct](#)

Minutes of the Meeting

Details of the issues discussed, and recommendations made at the meeting will be set out in the minutes, which the Committee will be asked to approve as a correct record at its next meeting.

Public Question Time

If you wish to speak or ask a question about any matter on the Committee's agenda please contact Democratic Services by 5pm providing 3 clear working days before the meeting. (for example, for a meeting being held on a Wednesday, the deadline will be 5pm on the Thursday prior to the meeting) Email democraticserviceteam@somerset.gov.uk or telephone 01823 357628.

Members of public wishing to speak or ask a question will need to attend in person or if unable can submit their question or statement in writing for an officer to read out, or alternatively can attend the meeting online. A 20-minute time slot for Public Question Time will be set aside near the beginning of the meeting, after the minutes of the previous meeting have been agreed. Each speaker will have 3 minutes to address the committee.

You must direct your questions and comments through the Chair. You may not take a direct part in the debate. The Chair will decide when public participation is to finish. If an item on the agenda is contentious, with many people wishing to attend the meeting or if multiple speakers wish to ask questions that are similar to others, a representative will need to be nominated to present the views of a group.

Meeting Etiquette for participants

- Only speak when invited to do so by the Chair.

- Mute your microphone when you are not talking.
- Switch off video if you are not speaking.
- Speak clearly (if you are not using video then please state your name)
- If you're referring to a specific page, mention the page number.
- There is a facility in Microsoft Teams under the ellipsis button called turn on live captions which provides subtitles on the screen.

Exclusion of Press & Public

If when considering an item on the agenda, the Committee may consider it appropriate to pass a resolution under Section 100A (4) Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 that the press and public be excluded from the meeting on the basis that if they were present during the business to be transacted there would be a likelihood of disclosure of exempt information, as defined under the terms of the Act.

If there are members of the public and press listening to the open part of the meeting, then the Democratic Services Officer will, at the appropriate time, ask participants to leave the meeting when any exempt or confidential information is about to be discussed.

Recording of meetings

The Council supports the principles of openness and transparency. It allows filming, recording, and taking photographs at its meetings that are open to the public - providing this is done in a non-disruptive manner. Members of the public may use Facebook and Twitter or other forms of social media to report on proceedings. No filming or recording may take place when the press and public are excluded for that part of the meeting.

Information about the Committee

This Scrutiny Committee covers the full range of functions covered by the Lead Member for Children and Families. The key focus of the Committee is to assist the Lead Member, the Executive, the Council and its partners to improve the life chances of all children in Somerset through effective and joined up approaches to the delivery of services.

The membership of the Committee includes 2 co-opted church representatives, 2 co-opted parent governor representatives, 2 school governor representatives and 1 representative from the Schools Forum. These co-opted members have voting rights on education matters.

The Committee has a useful 'glossary of terms' document, and this can be found on the website on the following link – [Glossary of Terms](#)

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Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families
18 September 2024 @ 10.00 am

**Sedgemoor Room, Bridgwater House, King Square,
Bridgwater, TA6 3AR**

To join the meeting via MS Teams, please see below

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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, 7 August 2024 at 9.30 am

Present:

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

Cllr Simon Carswell	Cllr Andy Hadley (attended remotely)
Cllr Pauline Ham	Cllr John Hunt (attended remotely)
Cllr Alistair Hendry	Cllr Marcus Kravis
Cllr Martin Lovell	Cllr Frances Nicholson

In attendance:

Cllr Heather Shearer

Other Members present remotely:

Cllr Andy Kendall	Cllr Jo Roundell Greene
Cllr Sarah Wakefield	

1 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Cllr J Snell and R Hobbs (co-opted member). Cllr J Hunt and Cllr A Hadley joined the meeting remotely.

2 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

The following additional declaration of interest was made:

- (a) Cllr E Potts-Jones – advised that is now working for a Member of Parliament - personal interest.

3 Minutes from the Meeting held on Wednesday 26 June 2024 - Agenda Item 3

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families held on Wednesday 26 June 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 next meeting is on Wednesday 18 September at 10am and will be held in the Sedgemoor Room, Bridgwater House, King Square, Bridgwater. Items to be considered at the meeting will include:-

- (a) Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Group – Cllr Nicholson had attended the meeting of the Group on 25 July 2024 on the Chair's behalf and will forward her specific points / comments to the Chair. The Chair mentioned the item for information on the agenda (item 10), which included information from the Joint Scrutiny Group meeting;
- (b) Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) of Somerset - serious youth violence - action plan

The Chair also said that he wants to have a conversation to identify and review the issues the Committee should be looking at in its work plan.

6 Children's Services - Budget Monitoring - Month 3 - Agenda Item 6

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from the Council's Head of Finance Business Partnering, C Evans who provided an update on the budget position for Children's Services - Month 3 (2024/25), with a £5.4m forecast overspend (3.8% of budget). The overspend predominantly relates to external placements (residential, unregistered), education cost pressures, DSG High Needs Block.

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

- query about external placements and information in the table on page 27 – *mentioned the 'residential parent and child' placement is not one used very often and is usually ordered by the Family Courts – when do use them, they are very expensive because the risks are so high and due to its nature, is also unpredictable; there are delays in the Family Courts system as well because the court system is overwhelmed which can have an impact on this.*
- external placements and query about the 'other' figure in the table on page 27, and what is included – *this includes other smaller placement types such as secure placements; leaving care accommodation costs – further details will be circulated to the Committee.*
- query about the £5.4m forecast overspend figure. The Chair mentioned that the two main areas of overspend have been external placements and home school transport and the Committee has done Task and Finish Group's on both issues – the item on the agenda later at the meeting on Transport will reference this – *in response to the points referenced, do try to pull every lever to do best thing for child; for example the Homes and Horizons intervention is helping to disrupt the marketplace.*
- requested details on the 'unregistered placements' and information about the impact of the pause of Homes and Horizons – *the Executive Director provided current position on the 5 unregistered placements and also the impact Homes & Horizons is having; 5 are open and 3 are being built but have been delayed due*

to capacity in corporate teams – homes 6 and 7 are delayed between 4 and 6 months; home 8 is delayed by about 3 – 4 months; having an impact on savings as homes and horizons for the most complex children is significantly lower cost than unregistered placement. She also referenced the Children’s Transformation Board which is chaired independently.

- the Committee agreed to ask the Executive to highlight if there are any Council related blockers to try to resolve them.
- query whether the budget setting is realistic in the first place – *budget is based and set on very clear / in depth modelling, but number of children in care has rise by 15% and this was not expected as the number of children in care has been reasonably consistent over a number of years – split between children under 2 in foster placements and 10-15 year olds with complex needs and are in residential care; insufficiency of foster placements both in the Council and nationally – noted the Committee will receive the Children’s Transformation Board deep dive report on CLA at its next meeting.*
- query about school exclusions – *not all children excluded from school come into care system; small proportion of the children who are excluded from school do come into the care system because of getting involved in other things, including serious violence; explained the purpose / use of the revenue grant and DSG; also doing work on ‘banding’ (amount schools receive for children and specific needs at different levels) it is a complex piece of work and this will come to the Committee to look at as well.*

In conclusion, the Chair said that he was sure that all Committee members would find it helpful to contact their local operations office or go into a school or education team as part of their learning and to ask questions between meetings to help build their knowledge / information base. Following a young person’s journey ‘through the service’ is also informative and interesting.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair thanked officers for the presentation and the Committee noted the budget position.

7 Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) of Somerset - serious youth violence - Report and Action Plan - Agenda Item 8

The Chair welcomed the following to the meeting for this agenda item - C Winter - Executive Director of Children, Families and Education, L Simpson, Area Commander, Somerset and North Somerset (Avon & Somerset Police) and M Davis, Designated Nurse, Safeguarding Children (ICB) attending on behalf of S Meldrum Chief Nursing officer & Director of Operations (ICB).

The Committee received a [presentation](#) which provided details of the outcome from the recent Somerset Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) – serious youth violence. In May, the Care Quality Commission, His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, Ofsted and His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation jointly inspected the Somerset area’s multi-agency response to children over 10, who are at risk of, or affected by, serious youth violence in the county. The report from the inspection, in the form of an ungraded letter was published on 18 July 2024 – [JTAI of Somerset](#).

They explained that in relation to the headline findings for the area inspection, it was

not a positive outcome:

- the inspection found that partnership working between organisations is not effective in identifying, understanding or responding to the extent of serious youth violence and criminal exploitation of children in Somerset.
- the oversight of partnership working, led by the Safer Somerset Partnership and the Somerset Safeguarding Children's Partnership lacks rigour, drive and challenge. These issues were accepted by both partnerships during the inspection process and work began immediately to plan a more impactful approach.
- serious weaknesses in multi-agency practice across organisations has meant that risks are not identified at the earliest opportunity.
- good practice was identified, for example in the system overall that responds well when there is clear and immediate risk to children at risk of serious youth violence.
- are determined to improve and was disappointing and worrying outcome from inspection.
- the Safer Somerset Partnership and the Safeguarding Children's Partnership, currently Chaired by Ms Winter has already met and are already collating action plans from all relevant organisations and strategically on behalf of each Partnership to improve partnership working in reducing serious youth violence and criminal exploitation in Somerset. These plans will be submitted to Ofsted by the Chair of the Safeguarding Children's Partnership, on behalf of the 3 Lead Safeguarding Partners by 25 October 2024. (This is the date set by the Inspectorates) - intend to submit in September as already understand what need to do and already working on the actions in the action plans.
- the multi-agency action plan will be considered at the next meeting of the Committee and the multi-agency plans will also be overseen and tested for effectiveness via the Integrated Care System Children and Families' Board, which meets every 2 months.

The Committee discussed the headline findings, covering governance and multi-agency safeguarding practice, asked a number of questions and made a number of comments, which were responded to at the meeting:-

- would like to understand what 'exploitation' includes – *includes County Lines, criminal exploitation, wide range of issues; will provide precise definition to the Committee.*
- Query about cross border partnership working – *do have regional policing responses for example, sharing intelligence and mapping across the southwest and responding appropriately; do need to form stronger system relationships across borders rather than just in individual organisations.*
- children have legal right to be educated to the age of 18, what happens if they are suspended, permanently excluded from school – *the local authority has duty to provide a level of education by day six post exclusion (just over a week); the provision unlikely to be another school because schools/ system is struggling, explained funding of SEND; always better for children to be in school, local to their own community with own friends.*
- questions about sharing information; who are the partners – housing teams?; role of community policing teams - *the intelligence picture - are pockets of front-line good practice; needs to be consistency; mentioned one team working which is part of the partnership focus; mention that all agencies will have own set of actions – there are, for example, 11 specific actions for the police; intelligence*

sharing (by police with partners) has been highlighted and a criticism to police was around how it is cascaded in way it should; issue is essentially that as a result of those action plans, actually more effective at safeguarding children; evaluation is integral to any action plan; mention of data sharing work around safeguarding; Inform work mentioned.

- quality of practice, getting systems right and role front line staff – *mentioned quality assurance process already in SCP; there is already multi-agency auditing happening and the current focus is on serious youth violence; do talk to front line practitioners; also statutory section 11 audit each year about safeguarding in general as well.*
- good to see that CAMHS are making timely response but query about their resources and capacity – *understanding it was they had reduced the waiting time for actual assessment and then on-going treatment.*

In conclusion, the Chair thanked Ms Winter, Ms Simpson and Ms Davis for the presentation and for attending the meeting.

The Committee noted the headline findings from the inspection. There will be the opportunity to explore the issues in more detail when the Committee considers the action plan at the next meeting.

8 Equality Due Regard requirement for Scrutiny - Agenda Item 7

The Chair welcomed the Council's Health Promotion Manager, Equalities, T Rutland to the meeting for this agenda item.

The Committee considered a [report](#) on the responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010, namely scrutiny members duty to have 'due regard' to the Public Sector Equality Duty as part of their role as Scrutiny members, following the peer challenge in relation to compliance with the quality framework for local government and the areas to focus on.

The Committee discussed the issues, asked a number of questions and made a number of comments, which were responded to at the meeting – covering, the role of scrutiny; access to training which is available to members and mention about the work of the Member Development Panel and looking to updating the members' pages on the website to signpost to training opportunities available; referred to the links set out in part 6 of the report and in particular the link to the Council's Constitution, which highlights the responsibilities and the requirements that scrutiny should be doing around the equality impact assessments and equalities agenda.

The Committee:

1. Reconfirmed their commitment to equality 'due regard' being part of its Scrutiny function.
2. A briefing paper for scrutiny be provided and to support further training opportunities that are provided for the delivery of this commitment.

9 School Transport Project - Agenda Item 9

The Chair welcomed the Council's Strategic Manager, Head of Education Places, P

Curd and the Council's Service Manager Transporting Somerset, J Perrett to the meeting for this agenda item and which was introduced by the Lead member for Children, Families and Education, Cllr Shearer.

The Committee received a [presentation](#) which provided an update on the school transport project.

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

- noted that school transport is a significant cost pressure for the Council (mainstream and specialist settings) and the work being done / intervention to offset cost increases.
- query about disabled access transport, suitable and needs being met – *explained that operators have to meet certain criteria and buses are required to be accessible.*
- the data provided about transport costs is helpful - *are performing well per capita head rate compared to comparator authorities; the School Travel Cost Management Strategy work had been presented at Scrutiny in [October 2022](#) and the member-supported Task & Finish Group was proposed. In May 2023, Edge Public Solutions published its review of home to school transport in Somerset and this work had also been shared and discussed with the Task and Finish Group and Scrutiny members; identified a number of supply side initiatives which could result in savings including around procurement; findings from the review helped inform Transport Review Project, overseen by new Transport Board; the new purpose built data dashboard is crucial to decision-making.*
- query if can include for example, data from Devon CC in the comparative data – *will see if can pool data from county council's and add to the dashboard.*
- question about the use and take up of extended / additional transport entitlement grants (page 42) – *will respond to query outside of meeting.*
- reverse auctions, SEN contracts and continuity of staff – *is condition of contract that they do everything can to maintain that continuity and this is monitored, to see how it works with the 20 contracts that have gone out on that basis.*
- query about access / accessibility to paid seats – *advised that the Public Sector Vehicle Accessibility Regulations applies to school transport as well; there are accessible coaches but are very expensive to operate; the situation currently is that have prioritised the routes that go into sixth form schools and still offering pay seats on those routes and using exemptions which are still available to deliver that.*
- query about the costs per head of transporting pupils and whether use existing bus routes – *most of the public transport network, particularly that is funded, is focussed on getting students to the 5 FE colleges in Somerset; do buy tickets where can on local bus services.*
- query about safe transport – *make use of geo mapping data and as part of the project have undertaken a review of all of those unsafe routes to see if there are corrections which can be made, which can help take vehicles off the road; are working with highways for example, to see if a formal crossing can be put in in one area (Bridgwater) which would result in taking 3 coaches off the road each morning; also working with planning colleagues around new housing developments and safe walking routes to the education infrastructure, so new developments do not result in additional school transport journeys.*
- query about centralised picks ups – *have started to introduce more centralised*

pick up points, where it is appropriate, at risk assessed locations and especially where have a significant amount of scale; will continue to collect children from their home address if centralised pick up is not appropriate for them.

- *questions about the reverse auction process – use knowledge of the transport officers on what the right price should be, which will show if it is too low / high and so far there has not been anything unrealistic ‘in the market; are taking time over this issue and will look at performance, sustainability over period of time.*
- the Chair thanked the officers for the presentation and commended them on the journey and good work, which has been shared at national forum’s, in particular around the data dashboard, which will have a huge impact on ability to target work.

The Committee welcomed and noted the on-going work, successes, for example in licensing, which has resulted in 32 new taxi operators approved and registered since Dec 2023, taking the total to 164 (the highest number ever had) and the innovation around procurement.

10 Items for Information - Standing Item - Agenda Item 10

The Committee noted the following items for information:

- (a) [Suicide Prevention Strategy for Somerset Consultation](#) - circulated on 25 July 2024.
- (b) 2024 KS2 headline data – circulated on 25 July 2024.
- (c) Briefing note on academisation / decision making process and procedure – circulated on 31 July 2024.
- (d) Information about the Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Group meeting held on 25 July which considered the [Adopt South West Annual Report 2023/24](#) – circulated on 30 July 2024.

The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Wednesday 18 September 2024 at 10am and will be held in the Sedgemoor Room, Bridgwater House, King Square, Bridgwater.

(The meeting ended at 12.10 pm)

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CHAIR

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Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families Work Plan 2024 - 2025

Committee meeting dates / proposed agenda items	Lead Officer/Item Lead
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mtg on 15.05.24 - suggestion by Cllr John Hunt - staffing in CSC – to be reviewed • Mtg on 15.05.24 – suggestion by Cllr Carswell – training to drivers / school transport drivers – include in Task & Finish group work – will be referenced in presentation on Home to school transport at August mtg • Mtg on 15.05.24 – update on DBS checks – to be scheduled • Mtg on 15.05.24 – JTAI inspection report – August mtg • Mtg on 15.05.24 - JTAI action plan – September mtg • Mtg on 26.06.24 – data sharing – to be scheduled • Mtg on 26.0.24 – circulate briefing note on decision-making process / procedure for academisation (schools) – August • Mtg on 26.06.24 – Transformation Board deep dive – CLA to be shared with Committee – September mtg 	
Wednesday 26 June 2024 @ 10 am	
Children’s Services Transformation Plan (deep dive)	Claire Winter, Executive Director of Children, Families and Education, and colleagues
Education, Health & Care Plan and annual reviews – progress update As background, link to report and presentation from meeting in December 2023)	Amelia Walker, Service Director Education
Children’s Services Budget Monitoring	Christian Evans, Head of Business Partnering and colleagues
Items for Information: (a) The SENDIAS Annual Report – circulated on 11 June 2024	
Wednesday 7 August 2024 @ 09.30 am	
Children’s Services - Budget Monitoring update – Month 3	Christian Evans Head of Business Partnering and colleagues
Equality Due Regard requirement for Scrutiny	Tom Rutland
Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) of Somerset – serious youth violence JTAI report – key issues arising and action plan (headline activity).	Claire Winter, Executive Director, Chief Insp Rebecca Wells-Cole, Shelagh Meldrum, ICB
Home to school transport	Phi Curd, Head of Education Places and John Perrett, Service Manager
Items for Information: (a) Suicide Prevention Strategy for Somerset Consultation - circulated on 25 July	

The focus for the Committee is – what impact does this have on the children in Somerset?

Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families Work Plan 2024 - 2025

Committee meeting dates / proposed agenda items	Lead Officer/Item Lead
(b) 2024 KS2 headline data – circulated on 25 July (c) Briefing note on academisation / decision making process and procedure – circulated on 31 July (d) Information about the Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 25 July which considered the Adopt South West Annual Report 2023/24 – circulated on 30 July	
Wednesday 18 September @ 10 am – Sedgemoor Room, Bridgwater	
Children’s Services - Budget Monitoring update – Month 4	Jo Currie, Service Manager, Siobhan Cleverley, Service Manager
JTAI - action plan	Claire Winter, Executive Director, Shelagh Meldrum, ICB and Lisa Simpson, Police
Transformation Board deep dive - CLA	Jayne Shelbourn-Barrow, Service Director Children & Families
Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Group – Report of meeting held 25 July 2024 and Current Terms of Reference	Claire Winter, Executive Director
External placements – update on recommendations made by the Task and Finish Group	Claire Winter, Executive Director,
Standing Panel for Education Standards - brief update	Amelia Walker, Service Director Education and Cllr Evie Potts-Jones
Items for information: (a) 2023 KS4 and KS2 outcomes / performance for each MAT – circulated on 8 August 2024 (b) Somerset Council Engagement and Participation AR for 2023-2024 – circulated on 12 August 2024 (c)	
21 October 2024 @ 10 am	
Children’s Services - Budget Monitoring update	Christian Evans Head of Business Partnering and colleagues
Regional Director (Schools)	Amelia Walker, Service Director Education
Changes to Fairer SEND Funding	Amelia Walker, Service Director Education

Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families Work Plan 2024 - 2025

Committee meeting dates / proposed agenda items	Lead Officer/Item Lead
SWAP Audit on EHCP Improvement Action Plan	Amelia Walker, Service Director Education
Data Sharing - provisional	Richard Selwyn, Service Director Commissioning & Performance
Children & Young People's Plan (CYPP) 2024 – 2030 - provisional	Fiona Phur, Service Manager
Feedback and Report on the Scrutiny Committee's priorities and focus of work	
9 December 2024 @ 10 am	
Children & Young People's Plan (CYPP) 2024 – 2030 - provisional	Fiona Phur, Service Manager

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Current membership 2024/2025:-

Chair: Councillor Leigh Redman (L) Vice-Chair: Councillor Evie Potts-Jones (LD)
 Councillors, Jason Baker (LD), Simon Carswell (LD), Peter Clayton (C), Andy Hadley (C), Alistair Hendry (C), Pauline Ham (LD), John Hunt (Ind), Marcus Kravis (LD), Martin Lovell (LD), Frances Nicholson (C), Jeny Snell (LD) Plus Ruth Hobbs, School Governor Rep, (voting on education matters) The Revd Tobie Osmond, Church of England Diocesan Rep, (voting on education matters) ~~Jo Simons, Schools Forum Rep, (voting on education matters)~~

Revised meeting dates for 2024/25

all meetings at Deane House except where indicated:

- **Wednesday 7 August @ 09.30 am**
- **Wednesday 18 September @ 10 am (Sedgemoor Room, Bridgwater).**
- **Monday 21 October @ 10 am**
- **Monday 9 December @ 10 am**
- **Monday 10 February @ 10am**
- **Monday 31 March @ 10am**
- **Monday 19 May @ 10am**

The focus for the Committee is – what impact does this have on the children in Somerset?

Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families Work Plan 2024 - 2025

Note: Members of the Scrutiny Committee and all other Members of Somerset County Council are invited to contribute items for inclusion in the work programme. Please contact Democratic Services (01823) 357628 & democraticserviceteam@somerset.gov.uk who will assist you in submitting your item.

Scrutiny Committee - Children & Families Outcome Tracker 2024 - 25

Agenda items	Lead / Owner	Agreed Outcome	RAG Status
Joint meeting with Adults and Health Scrutiny on 25 October 2023			
Somerset approach to reducing smoking and youth vaping	Kate Anderson Rachel Handley	<p>The Committee received a presentation from Public Health Team and engaged in discussions and debate of the points raised. The presentation raised several important and informative points.</p> <p>The Committee agreed a recommendation that they wished to present to The Executive and unanimously agreed would write to the Executive in relation to electronic cigarettes, as follows:-</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Committee asked that the current government consultation (link to the consultation Creating a smokefree generation and tackling youth vaping: your views - Department of Health and Social Care (dhsc.gov.uk) be shared with all members who are encouraged to complete and promote locally in their divisions. The consultation runs to 6 December 2023. 2. The Committee asked that Licensing committee be asked to review and action stronger enforcement of the sale of these devices in line with the current legal position. 3. The Committee asked that the 'Quit tool not cool tool' slogan, as highlighted by the presentation be supported and promoted in the council. 4. The Committee requested that Council take a position with regard to seeking government to work at increasing legislation around electronic cigarettes, that included but not conclusive:- a ban of the use of single use devices with exception of use to support stopping smoking, a ban on child targeting (advertising and packaging), an introduction of plain packaging that would include a health warning, an introduction of an increasing age ban on sales of these devices in line with the change made to cigarette sales. 	On going

The focus for the Committee is – 'what impact does this have on the children in Somerset'?

Scrutiny Committee - Children & Families Outcome Tracker 2024 - 25

12 December 2023			
Children's Services Transformation Priorities 2023 - 2026		<p>The Chair referred to the discussions at the last meeting of the Committee on the Children's transformation priorities and invited volunteers to focus on particular strands of the transformation priorities, to allow individual meetings with officers to gain a better understanding / learn more about one of the areas, as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education for life • CLA Transformation • SEND Strategy • Connect Somerset <p>The following Committee members expressed an interest in the areas:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education for Life – Jo Simons; • CLA Transformation – Cllr E Potts-Jones, Cllr M Lovell; • SEND Strategy – Cllr S Carswell, Cllr F Nicholson; • Connect Somerset – Tobie Osmond, Ruth Hobbs. 	On-going
13 March 2024			
Report back from committee members on Children's Services Transformation Priorities /Areas	various	<p>Further to the meeting in December 2023, the Committee received a verbal report back from committee members on Children's Services Transformation Priorities /Areas:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education for Life – Jo Simons • CLA Transformation - Cllr Evie Potts, Cllr Martin Lovell • SEND Strategy – Cllr Simon Carswell, Cllr Frances Nicholson • Connect Somerset - Tobie Osmond, Ruth Hobbs <p>The Chair thanked members and officers for their on-going work and the Committee noted the update.</p>	<p>On-going</p> <p><i>Info from Jo Simons about the Education for Life Year 1 event circulated on 14 March '24</i></p>

The focus for the Committee is – 'what impact does this have on the children in Somerset'?

Scrutiny Committee - Children & Families Outcome Tracker 2024 - 25

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15 May 2024			
care experience as a protected characteristic	Fiona Phur	<p>The Committee received a presentation on the care experience as a Protected Characteristic. The Council in May 2023 agreed to 8 recommendations to implement care experience as a Protected Characteristic and the Committee noted the actions arising. In March 2020 the Council signed the national Care Leaver’s Covenant and Committee to meeting its five core outcomes. Noted the Somerset definition of ‘care leavers and care experienced’ and the proposed next steps / considerations for implementation.</p> <p>Discussed the ambition for children / Corporate Parent Board (CPB) role (not statutory requirement); Somerset definition now agreed by legal team; is quite wide-ranging definition; need to be clear on parameters; with definition can move forward / on journey; around influence & encouragement; do support beyond 25 if able (but not a lifelong service); role of CPB.</p> <p>Data provided and number of those who experience homelessness (slide on page 56 – slide 6) – (a) seek more information / breakdown of figures in more detail and the cttee could look at that at later date; (b) ask for update on care experience as protected characteristic at some point to a future meeting, (including views of those who are care experienced) (c) CPB is where can & do hold people to account.</p> <p>Mentioned the data dashboard produced for the CPB is interesting / information. (Big sleep out on 15 June – experience what it’s like to sleep on the street).</p>	<p>On-going</p> <p>To be followed up</p> <p>To be arranged</p>
26 June 2026			
Work plan		<p>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.</p>	<p>October mtg</p> <p>circulated</p>

The focus for the Committee is – ‘what impact does this have on the children in Somerset’?

Scrutiny Committee - Children & Families Outcome Tracker 2024 - 25

Children's Services Transformation Plan (deep dive)	Claire Winter	<p>Presentation on the Children's Transformation Programme – providing update o / summary on progress, overarching finance summary, MTFP tracker and on the work of the priority workstreams:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 <p>Agreed that data sharing and 'how it work's' will be added to the work plan.</p>	<p>On going</p> <p>prov October mtg</p>
Children's Services Budget monitoring	Christian Evans	<p>Presentation providing an update on the budget position, covering (a) the provisional 23/24 outturn position (£12.4m adverse overspend – predominately relating to external placements, fieldwork (support for children at home), and SEND transport); and (b) the emerging 24/25 issues.</p> <p>Agreed that Transformation Board 'deep dive' report on CLA will be shared with committee.</p> <p>Stressed need to see most up to date financial details to be able fully scrutinise effectively.</p>	<p>On going</p> <p>September mtg</p>
7 August 2024			
Work Plan		<p>Agreed that Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Group be discussed further at next meeting (Report from meeting on 25 July 2024 and current ToR).</p> <p>(Notes from the meeting held on 25 July had been circulated to Committee members as an item for information).</p>	<p>September mtg</p>

The focus for the Committee is – 'what impact does this have on the children in Somerset'?

Scrutiny Committee - Children & Families Outcome Tracker 2024 - 25

Equality Due Regard requirement for Scrutiny	Tom Rutland	<p>Considered report on the responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010, namely scrutiny members duty to have Due Regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty as part of their role as Scrutiny members.</p> <p>Reconfirmed their commitment to Equality Due Regard being part of its Scrutiny function; a briefing paper for scrutiny be provided; to support training opportunities that are provided for the delivery of this commitment.</p>	Completed
School Transport Project	Phil Curd John Perrett	<p>Presentation which provided an update on the school transport project</p> <p>Noted that School Travel Cost Management Strategy work had been presented at Scrutiny in October 2022 and the member-supported Task & Finish Group was proposed. In May 2023, Edge Public Solutions published its review of home to school transport in Somerset and this work had also been shared and discussed with the Task and Finish Group and Scrutiny members.</p> <p>The Committee welcomed the positive updated and noted the on-going work, successes (licensing) and innovation around procurement (reverse auction trial in Mendip).</p> <p>The work is being presented to national forums (especially around data dashboard which has huge impact on ability to target work).</p> <p>Will investigate if can pull comparative data from county council authorities to add to the data dashboard.</p>	Completed

The CYPP 2022 - 2025 had been produced following a multi-agency process. The CYPP had three priorities: keeping children and young people safe (priority 1); supporting physical and emotional health and resilience (priority 2); enabling young people to learn and thrive (priority 3)

[Somerset Children & Young People's Plan – SSCP \(safeguardingsomerset.org.uk\)](https://safeguardingsomerset.org.uk)

Completed	Action complete and will be removed from tracker for next meeting
Pending	Action on-going or plans in place to address.
Incomplete	No action currently in place with a minimum of 3 months since action agreed.

[The focus for the Committee is – 'what impact does this have on the children in Somerset'?](#)

24/25 Month 4 Budget Monitoring Report

Children & Families Scrutiny Committee -
18 September 2024

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Somerset
Council

Agenda Item 6

Childrens Services Month 4 2024/25

General fund
£141.9m net
budget

£6.4m forecast
overspend
(4.5% of
budget)

	Budget 24/25 £m	Month 4 24/25 £m	Variance £m	Movement from month 3 (Fav) / Adv £m
Children & Families	98.0	104.3	6.3	1.2
Commissioning & Performance	11.1	10.8	(0.3)	0.1
Education & Transport	32.4	32.8	0.4	(0.3)
Childrens Services Team	0.4	0.4	-	-
Total	141.9	148.3	6.4	1.0

External Placements Month 4 24/25

The table opposite provides a breakdown of the external placements budget by placement type.

The main areas of overspend are:

- Residential placements - £4.8m gross overspend, £6.7m overspend (net of DSG and NHS income)
- Unregistered placements - £1.8m gross overspend

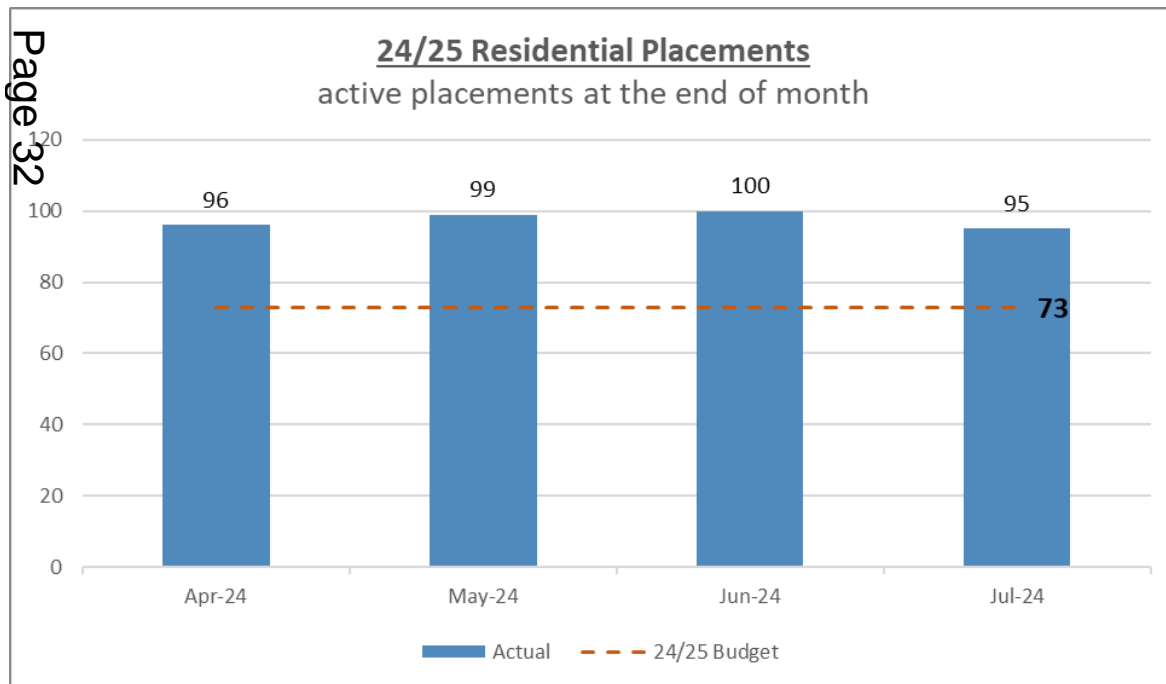
* 'Other' spend relates to a combination of smaller budgeted placement types – IFA Staying Put, IFA Parent & Child, Remand, Leaving Care Accommodation

External Placements	24/25 Budget	Full Year Outturn	Overall Variance	Movement from Month 3
	£m	£m	£m	£m
Residential Placements	29.7	34.5	4.8	(0.0)
Independent Fostering Agencies	7.9	8.1	0.2	(0.1)
16+ Supported Accommodation	5.6	4.1	(1.6)	0.5
Homes & Horizons	5.9	5.9	0.0	0.0
Unregistered Placements	0.8	2.7	1.8	0.5
UASC Placements	2.5	3.2	0.7	0.1
Residential Parent & Child	0.7	2.1	1.3	(0.3)
Secure	1.3	0.7	(0.6)	0.4
Thrive 16+	4.1	4.1	0.0	0.0
Other	1.4	2.8	1.4	0.1
Total Expenditure	60.0	68.2	8.2	1.2
DSG Grant	(6.5)	(5.3)	1.2	0.0
UASC Grant	(2.3)	(2.4)	(0.1)	(0.0)
NHS Funding	(4.5)	(3.8)	0.7	(0.3)
Other	(0.8)	(0.8)	0.0	0.0
Total Income	(14.1)	(12.4)	1.8	(0.4)
Net Expenditure	45.9	55.9	9.9	0.8

Residential Placements Month 4 24/25

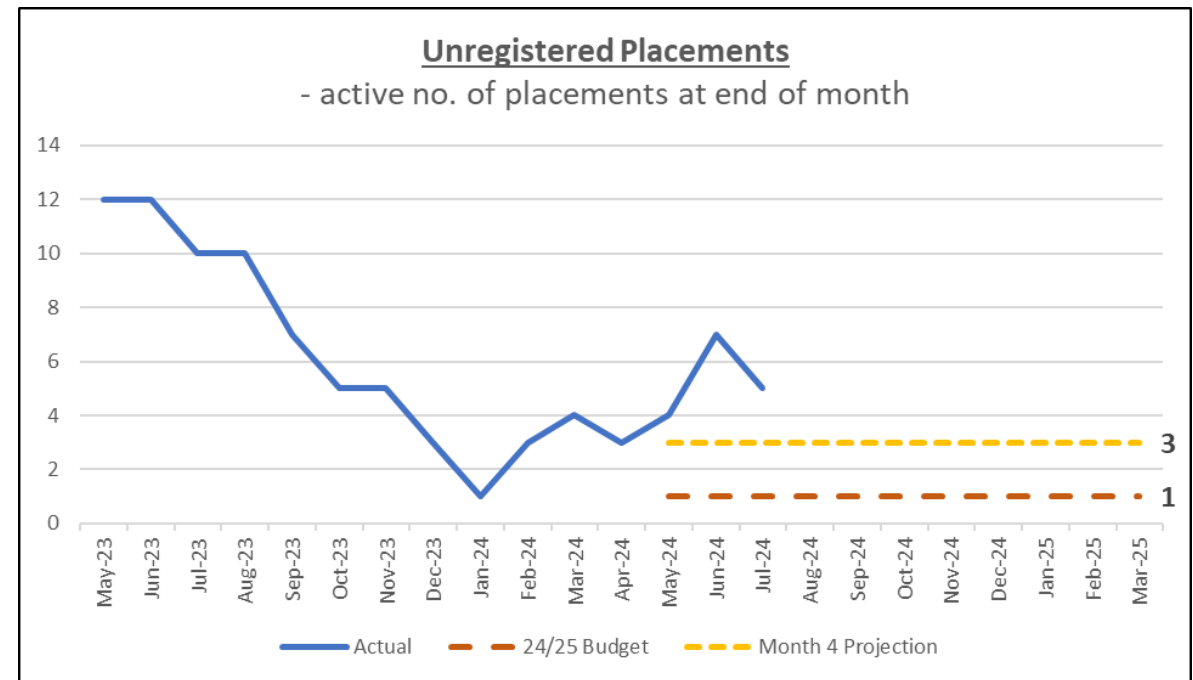
The graph below shows the trend in the **number of active residential placements** at the end of each month during 24/25.

The budgeted number of residential placements for 24/25 is 73.



After seeing an increase in unregistered placements from January 24, numbers are starting to level off and decline slightly with current active numbers at the end of July being 5.

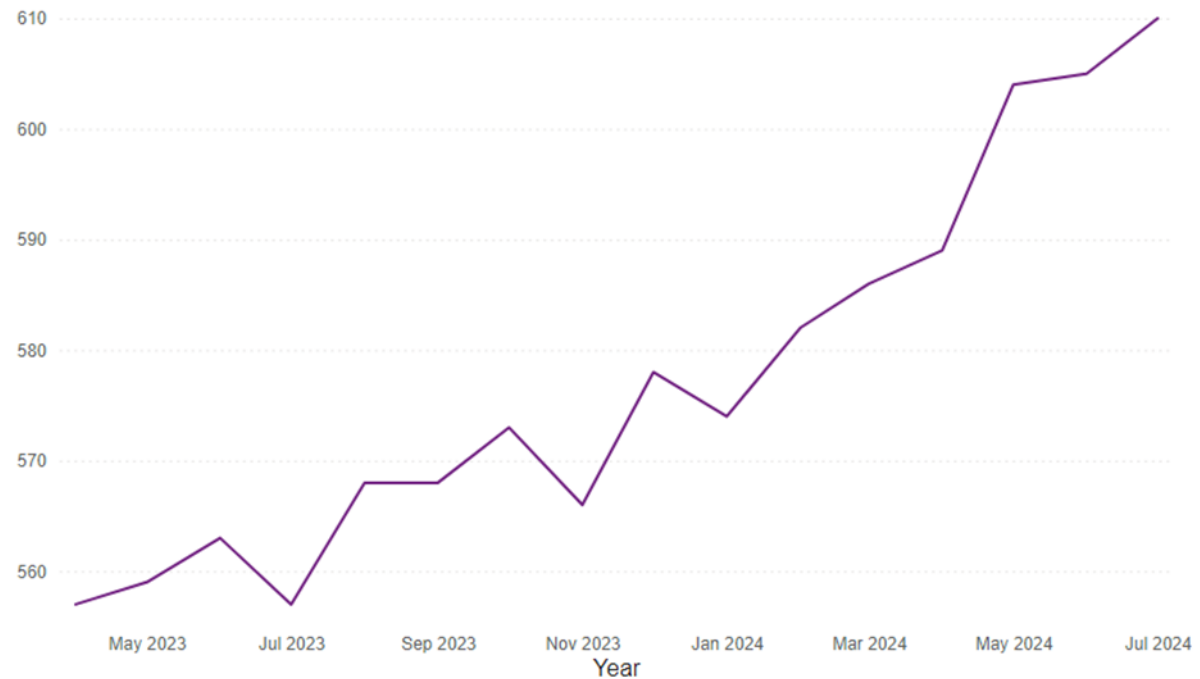
The budgeted number of unregistered placements for 24/25 is 1.



Children Looked After Numbers

The graphs opposite shows the total children looked after (CLA) numbers over the last 12 months. There has been a rise of 53 CLA with the more recent numbers coming into care moving into high-cost residential placements.

CLA Total by Month



Education & Transport Forecast Month 4 24/25

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Area – all in £m	Budget 24/25	Forecast 24/25	Variance A/(F)	Movement from month 3 (Fav) / Adv £m
Education	6.0	7.0	1.0	(0.2)
Home to School Transport	13.0	12.4	(0.6)	(0.1)
SEND Transport	13.4	13.4	-	-
Total	32.4	32.8	0.4	(0.3)



Education pressure due to various factors:

- Inflation increases not fully passed on
- Reduction in customer base
- Pressure on LA spend due to MTFP savings not fully expected to be achieved

The favourable variance of £0.6m in Home to School transport largely relates to the Extended Rights to Travel grant, which was budgeted as £0.6m however the actual grant is £1.1m, the difference of £0.5m is shown as a favourable variance.

DSG High Needs Block forecast Month 4 24/25

Category	2024/25 Budgeted Pupils	2024/25 Current Budget £m	2024/25 Forecast £m	Variance A/(F) £m
Special schools places & top up	1,147	24.6	25.1	0.5
INMS & Pre 16	508	32.8	34.4	1.6
Post 16	845	8.9	8.9	-
Mainstream top up & costed plans	2,119	12.5	15.8	3.3
Pupil Referral Units	348	8.9	8.9	-
Autism Spectrum Disorder Bases	177	2.2	2.2	-
Advisory Services & Virtual School	-	4.1	4.1	-
SEN Transformation & Other Services	-	2.3	2.3	-
Total	5,144	96.3	101.7	5.4
Net funding after recoupment		77.4	77.4	-
Forecast in-year deficit		18.9	24.3	5.4

INMS placements
DMP average – 415
Forecast - 449

Increase due to rise
in mainstream
costed plans and top
ups

Month 3 forecast
£4.2m adverse

Acronyms

- CLA – children looked after
- UASC – unaccompanied asylum seeker children
- IFA – independent foster agency
- DSG – dedicated school's grant
- DMP – deficit management plan
- INMS – independent non-maintained schools
- SEND – special educational needs and disabilities
- EHCP – education, health and care plan

Questions



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Scrutiny Committee – Children & Families

September 2024

Deep Dive - Children Looked After

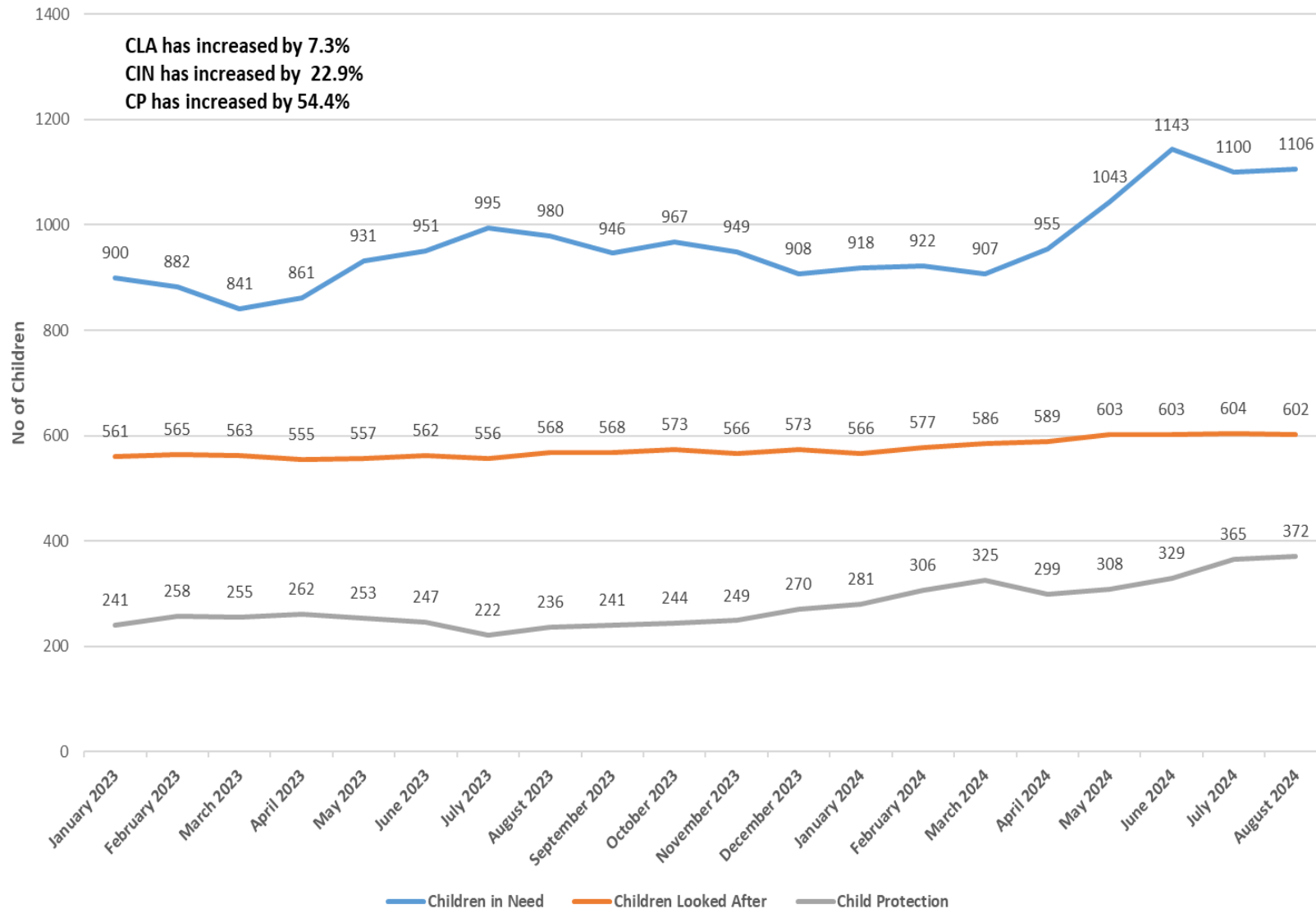


Purpose

- Provide a commentary to Scrutiny Committee on the rising numbers of Children Looked After (CLA) by:
 - Comparing numbers of children becoming looked after versus those ceasing to be looked after
 - Exploring reasons for this.
 - Setting out further work to be undertaken
 - Taking direction from scrutiny for further reporting

Demand for a service from Children's Social Care has increased in the last 18 months.

Increase in Demand since January 2023



Children Becoming Looked After

- From January 2023 – June 2024, 293 children have become looked after.

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Age in years	Number of children / YP	%
0 – 2	85	29
3 – 5	26	9
5 – 10	44	15
11 – 15	78	27
16 & 17	60	20

Children Ceasing to be Looked After

- Jan – June 2023 – 123 children left our care
- Jan – June 2024 – 100 children left our care – 19% decrease

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Age in years	Jan – June 2023	%	Jan – June 2024	%
0 – 2	28	23	28	28
3 – 5	13	11	10	10
6 – 10	15	12	4	4
11 – 15	11	9	9	9
16 & 17	3	2	6	6
18+	53	43	43	43

Reasons for ceasing to be Looked After

	2023	2024
Returned to family / connected carer	21	21
Special Guardianship Order (SGO)	16	15
Adoption	17	16

Points to Note:

- Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASCs) remained consistent since 2021/22 - we mainly receive 16- & 17-year-olds from the NTS, so they turn 18 much quicker which reduces CLA numbers but impacts on Leaving Care provision. Dip last summer when we stopped receiving for 3 months whilst we secured accommodation with a provider.
- Children age out of care when they turn 18 years of age – bigger than average cohort in August 2024 (13 rather than 5-8) and a further larger cohort in January 2025. In the same period last year 104 children aged out whereas this year in will be 125.

Areas being explored:

1. Length of care proceedings which impacts on children returning to family, SGO, adoption.

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2. Education – the impact of attendance and exclusions

3. Reintegration and the barriers

4. Areas of growth coming in

Length of care proceedings

- Proceedings should be completed in 26 weeks, nationally average is 37, South West region 35, Taunton courts 47 weeks
- Our discussions with legal have not highlighted any significant practice concerns but rather court delays (delays in hearings, excessive hearings, court ordered assessments, judgements not being given in a timely way)
- We continue to work closely with Cafcass, including joint auditing work and increasing our shared understanding to get it right for children.

Education

- School places, attendance, exclusions
- Impact on families and communities
- Children in our care without a full time education package

Note: the recent exclusions project identified that 80% of the cohort of children identified by a target number of schools as being at risk of permanent exclusion were not open to Children's Services. Lack of graduated response.

Reintegration

- Have we lost focus on reintegration due to increasing demand and complexity?
- Page 49 We are exploring the 'offer' to help children reintegrate home and the sustainability of these arrangements – including role of Emotional Health & Wellbeing Team, Family Group Conference Model, extension of Family Safeguarding Model.
- Requires a dedicated resource

Areas of growth coming in – audits undertaken

0 – 5 year olds (approx. 38% of those becoming looked after)

- All cases reviewed it was appropriate for us to be in legal framework
- Our practice was proportionate showing a graduated response and those cases that were non-accidental injuries or trigger incidents we went straight to proceedings.
- Of the cases reviewed only a third were completed in 26 weeks, with one taking 9 months for a hearing to be scheduled with still no date for final hearing.
- Of the cases reviewed 64% had a final care plan of adoption and a further 18% placed with family.

Areas of growth coming in – audits undertaken

11 – 15 year olds - deep dive of 8 children (10% of the children that had become looked after in last 18 months)

- Page 51 1 child was a UASC, the other 7 children had previous involvement with us when younger.
- 5 of the 8 had a significant history – multiple referrals over time / Child Protection Plans or previous proceedings.
- For those with a significant history identifiable behaviours linked with trauma and or abuse.

Further quality assurance to be undertaken to look for learning.

Further areas to explore

- What does the learning tell us?
- We are changing our supervision practice – to reflect on previous interventions to ensure we don't keep repeating the cycle of intervention – further audit work planned.
- What about the 5 – 10 age group? – is our intervention right?
- Can we change the trajectory for those aged 11-15?
- Any questions?

Report of the RAA Joint Scrutiny Group – 25th July 2024

1. Introduction

The Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) Joint Scrutiny Group is an informal meeting of representative Scrutiny Members from Cornwall Council, Devon County Council, Somerset Council, Plymouth City Council and Torbay Council and has been established to maintain a strategic overview of the activity and performance of Adopt South West, the RAA for Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Plymouth and Torbay, and report any significant findings or recommendations back to individual local authority scrutiny committees.

This report outlines the topics covered at the Group's meeting on 25th July 2024, highlights the key points raised during discussion, and details any agreed actions or recommendations back to the individual local authority Scrutiny Committees.

2. Attendance

Scrutiny Members

Cornwall Council: Councillor Peter Guest

Devon County Council: Councillors Tracy Adams (Chair) and Philip Sanders

Plymouth City Council: Councillor Zoe Reilly

Somerset Council: Councillor Evie Potts-Jones and Councillor Frances Nicholson (substitute for Councillor Leigh Redman)

Torbay Council: Councillor John Fellows

Other attendees

Steve Liddicott, Deputy Director of Children's Health and Wellbeing (Devon County Council)

Amanda White, Head of Service - Adopt South West (Devon County Council)

Ben Davies, Service Director – Children and Family Services (Cornwall Council)

Charlie Fisher, Scrutiny Officer (Devon County Council)

Fiona Abbott, Senior Democratic Services Officer (Somerset Council)

Teresa Buckley, Democratic Services Team Leader (Torbay Council)

Apologies: Councillor James Mustoe and Councillor Leigh Redman

3. Meeting Notes and Actions

3.1 Welcome and introductions

Cllr Adams welcomed Members and Officers to the meeting.

3.2 Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting, 31st January 2022, were agreed.

3.3 Terms of Reference

Charlie Fisher, Scrutiny Officer, introduced the revised Terms of Reference document for the Group. The terms of references needed revising due to the inclusion of Cornwall Council to the group, the recognition that Somerset Council was now a unitary authority and not a County Council and some changes to the names of Scrutiny Committees amongst the Member authorities.

It was felt that the document needs to be strengthened in terms of strategic accountability of the RAA and the strategic oversight and influence of the Group. It was agreed that the draft terms of reference would be referred back to the Adopt South West Strategic Board for reconsideration. It was noted that this was timely since the Strategic Board is undertaking a wider review of the Inter-agency Agreement that governs Adopt South West.

Actions:

- (a) That the Terms of Reference document would be re-circulated to Members after the meeting.
- (b) That the Terms of Reference be referred to the Adopt South West Strategic Board to review as part of a wider review of accountability of the strategic overview of Adopt South West.

3.4 Adopt South West Annual Report 2023/24

Amanda White, Head of Service - Adopt South West, presented the [Adopt South West Annual Report 2023/24](#) to the Members of the Group.

Key areas highlighted in the report:

- Adopt South West started on 1st April 2018 as the Regional Adoption Agency for Devon, Plymouth, Somerset and Torbay. There are now 33 RAAs across the Country. Cornwall Council and the Isles of Scilly have been part of the RAA since 1st April 2024.
- **The children** - By year end, there were 196 children with a plan for adoption, an increase of 15.2%. Of the 109 children placed in 23/24, 91.3% (100) were placed with Adopt South West adopters, 8% higher than the previous year.
- **Timeliness** – the average number of days between a placement order being made and a child being formally matched to their adoptive family fell from 214 to 206 days, although Devon’s timeliness as a local authority rose from 147 to 269 days.
- **Early Permanence** – This year saw a national focus on Early Permanence (or Foster for Adopt) following the launch of the Early Permanence National Standards in February 2023. The principle of this is that the first placement is the only placement. Adopt South West has seen improved performance to 42.4% of children placed under early permanence regulations, compared to 36.15% in 2022/23 and 21% nationally in 2023/24. The Head of Service reported that this means Adopt South West is the highest performing area.
- **Adopters** – Despite active marketing, the recruitment of adopters fell 19% last year from 81 to 67 adopters. National data also shows a decline in applicants for adoption. The Head of Service highlighted that potential adopters were coming forward and being interested and there was only 6% lower attendance at information events. However, it was the Head of Service’s view that potential adopters were taking longer to make a decision about their adoption journey and as such the service is trying to analyse this to get feedback on potential adopters. In 2024/25 so far, the service has seen an increase of 27 households and the Head of Service was optimistic that performance would improve in the current year.

- The adopter gap, (the number of children needing families against the number of families available) slightly decrease on last year, from 29% to 27%, with 43% of our children who had been waiting 3 months placed.
- **Marketing and Recruitment** – The service has continued the ‘Think Again’ campaign, appealing to prospective fosters who had previously considered adoption but had decided it wasn’t the right time.
- **Non-agency adoptions** – The number of adoption orders for partner adoption assessments rose from 10 in 2022/23 to 28 in 2023/24.
- **Family breakdown** – The numbers of family breakdowns are coming down, 7 in 2022/23 to 5 in 2023/24. The Head of Service commented that the Service sometimes do not know about family breakdowns because there are a number of differentials within ‘family breakdowns’ outside of the adoption simply not working. However, nationally the percentage of family breakdowns is low.
- **Adoption Support** - Head of Service highlighted it is the priority for the service and the Strategic Plan to improve the post-adoption support to be earlier. There have been an increasing number of referrals for Adoption Support from 332 in 2019/20 to 1068 in 2023/24. A significant development in Adoption Support has been the introduction of a Triage Team, a dedicated team of social workers and family practitioners who act as the first point of contact for people referred to the service for support.
- **Maintaining relationships** - Adopt South West co-ordinated 3113 exchanges between birth and adoptive families in the year. There were 10,086 letterbox exchanges, the exchange of information between the adoptive family and members of the birth family.
- **Finance** – In 2023/24 the Service had a net underspend of £551,804 against their budget of £5.430m, received from the constituent local authorities. This underspend was returned to the local authorities. In 2024/25 the Service has a budget of £6.588m, with a revised funding formula to reflect the addition of Cornwall.
- **Focus for 2024/25** – The focus for the following year reflects the expansion with Cornwall and a need to ensure practice and process alignment with Cornwall. The key themes are Voice and Influence, Maintaining significant relationships and Timely adoption support.

Discussion with Members included:

- Members welcomed the report and improved performance across the service.
- Members welcomed the improved performance of 91% of children placed with Adopt South West Adopters and improved performance with Early Permanence. Members asked what Adopt South West did to improve the performance? The Head of Service highlighted national and regional conferences that covered Early Permanence and key research which highlighted the need to ensure Early Permanence. The service also reviewed family finding for the children who were waiting based on the think again campaign, asking potential adopters to think again about their situation and utilise adopters who were waiting for children.

- Members welcomed inter agency adoptions and what more can Adopt South West do to improve performance? The Head of Service commented on the peer reviews across local authorities and the RAA. Cornwall joining the RAA meant learning could be shared amongst the other local authorities. In addition, there were Early Permanence champions within each local authority within adoption and fostering services.
- If Early Permanence improvements had positively impacted avoiding family breakdowns? The Head of Service responded there wasn't the evidence for this yet but the service has better relationships in families and children having a better understanding of who has looked after them. The service has seen positive outcomes where adopters have bridged children back to birth families and gave an example of this to Members.
- If the cost of living crisis has had an impact on the number of adopters coming forward? The Head of Service highlighted the Adoption UK's [Adoption Barometer report](#) and stated there is a lack of confidence in people's personal circumstances with adopters not being able to or financially ready to adopt and sustain an adoption.
- Members asked about the process to become an adopter and if there was a drop-out rate? Notwithstanding the need for checks and processes to be stringent, the Head of Service commented that generally, potential adopters do not drop out midway through the process because they were committed to adoption. The Head of Service highlighted there is a 6 month target for the process, and that ASW's performance was good on this timeliness. In recent years, families with more complexities are coming forward as potential adopters which do mean more checks and references are needed.

Actions:

- (a) Members welcomed the Adopt South West Annual Report 2024/24 and noted the Adopt South West Strategy 2024/27.

3.5 Work Planning / Future Meetings

It was agreed that when the Strategic Board had reconsidered the joint scrutiny group's terms of reference, and any amendments to the inter-agency agreement, that they should be brought for consideration to the joint scrutiny group.

Actions:

- (a) That the Chair would convene a further meeting in 2024 to consider the final Terms of Reference and Inter Agency Agreement.
- (b) That the next meeting of the Joint Scrutiny Group to review the Annual Report be chaired and hosted by Somerset Council in around 12 months time (July 2025).

The meeting began at 14:05 and ended at 15:20.

Councillor Tracy Adams
Chair of RAA Joint Scrutiny Group
25th July 2024

RAA Joint Scrutiny Group Terms of Reference

1. Purpose

The Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) Joint Scrutiny Group is an informal meeting of representative Scrutiny Members from Cornwall Council, Devon County Council, Plymouth City Council, Somerset Council, and Torbay Council, those councils which form Adopt South West.

This Terms of Reference has no constitutional standing, but simply serves as a guide to support the running and work of this group.

2. Scope and remit

The main focus of the RAA Joint Scrutiny Group is to maintain a strategic overview of the activity and performance of Adopt South West across the RAA area and report any significant findings or recommendations back to individual local authority scrutiny committees.

The RAA Joint Scrutiny Group will also receive and consider the Adopt South West Annual Report.

The RAA Joint Scrutiny Group may make recommendations to the relevant Scrutiny committees of Cornwall, Devon, Plymouth, Somerset and Torbay Councils but has no decision-making powers, or powers to make formal recommendations directly to any of the five local authorities' Executive/Cabinets or to Adopt South West.

3. Membership and attendance

Membership of the RAA Joint Scrutiny Group:

- Cornwall Council: Chair and Vice Chair of Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Devon County Council: Chair and Vice Chair of Children's Scrutiny Committee
- Plymouth City Council: Chair and Vice Chair of Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel.
- Somerset Council: Chair and Vice Chair of Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families
- Torbay Council: Chair or Vice-Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Board and the Chair of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board.

Members of each constituent authority may nominate a substitute to attend in their absence. Any substitutions must be non-executive Members.

Other Attendance:

- Chair of the Adopt South West Strategic Partnership Board
- Chair of the Adopt South West Operational Board

- Head of Service - Adopt South West
- Scrutiny/Democratic Services Officers (to support the running of the group)

4. Frequency of meetings

The RAA Joint Scrutiny Group will hold its main meeting annually in July, to consider the draft Adopt South West Annual Report.

Where business requires, additional meetings and training sessions may be held in consultation with the nominated Chair, hosting authority and Head of Service, and subject to resourcing.

5. Hosting and resourcing

The RAA Joint Scrutiny Group meeting will be hosted by the local authority of the incumbent Chair, and as such will rotate annually. The 'Election of the next meeting's Chair' will be listed on the agenda at the main annual meeting.

Agenda preparation, note taking and scrutiny support will be provided by the Scrutiny/Democratic Services officer from the hosting authority. The Scrutiny/Democratic Services Officer will also draft a report on behalf of Members (referenced in paragraph 7 below).

It is expected that meetings would take place virtually, although Members may decide to meet in person if necessary.

Each constituent authority will be responsible for meeting any travel expenses incurred by its own Members and officers.

6. Agendas and reports

The agenda will be drafted by the Scrutiny/Democratic Services Officer in consultation with the Chair and the Adopt South West Manager, and will reflect the RAA Scrutiny Group's scope and remit. Additional items may be included at the discretion of the Chair.

The agenda and relevant reports will be circulated by email to Members and other attendees, five working days in advance of the meeting.

It is expected that the majority of the reports considered at the meeting will be produced by Adopt South West.

7. Reporting and local scrutiny arrangements

The RAA Joint Scrutiny Group will provide a brief report to the individual local authority scrutiny committees to be considered at their next meeting of their usual Scrutiny Committee cycle. The report will summarise the information shared and any pertinent discussion points from the annual meeting of the group. Where appropriate, papers considered by the RAA Joint Scrutiny Group will be made available online.

The report may include recommendations or suggestions for the future work programmes of the individual local authority scrutiny committees.

Local arrangements for scrutinising adoption will be retained by individual local authority Scrutiny committees e.g. Each of the local authority Scrutiny committees can receive a report from the RAA Service Manager on adoption performance and outcomes for children in their local authority area (i.e. Devon's Children's Scrutiny Committee can receive a report on adoption in Devon).

Created: February 2020

Updated: July 2024

Contact: Charlie Fisher, Scrutiny Officer, Devon County Council
scrutiny@devon.gov.uk

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Scrutiny Committee – Children and Families Meeting on 18th September 2024

Update report in relation to the External placements task and finish group that presented their findings to the Children and Families’ Scrutiny Committee on 6th March 2023

Lead officer: Claire Winter, Executive Director, Children Families and Education

1. Background

- 1.1 The Children and Families’ Scrutiny Committee External Placements Task and Finish Group presented their findings to the Scrutiny Committee on 6 March 2023.

The group made the following recommendations to the Executive:

- That the Council enhances its own capacity and provision for placements by creating more homes in Somerset.
- That the Council should not make any placements in homes which are not registered with Ofsted
- That the Council considers buying local block (contract) places, to increase capacity/provision
- That the Council pledges that the language used in this area should always refer to ‘placements’ rather than ‘children’ when reporting on work to support our children who are looked after (CLA).
- That Council lobbies Government through the Local Government Association (LGA) to better support councils with guidance, help with forecasting and impact planning, review regulations and commission an annual ‘state of the sector’ review.

- 1.2 Councillor Tessa Munt, the then Lead Member for Children’s Services, presented a response from the Executive to the Scrutiny Committee on 13th September 2023.

The response is set out in full here - [\(Public Pack\)Agenda Supplement 2 - External Placements T&F Group - Executive response - agenda item 9 Agenda Supplement for Scrutiny Committee - Childrens and Families, 13/09/2023 10:00 \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

2. Further update

2.1 *That the Council enhances its own capacity and provision for placements by creating more homes in Somerset.*

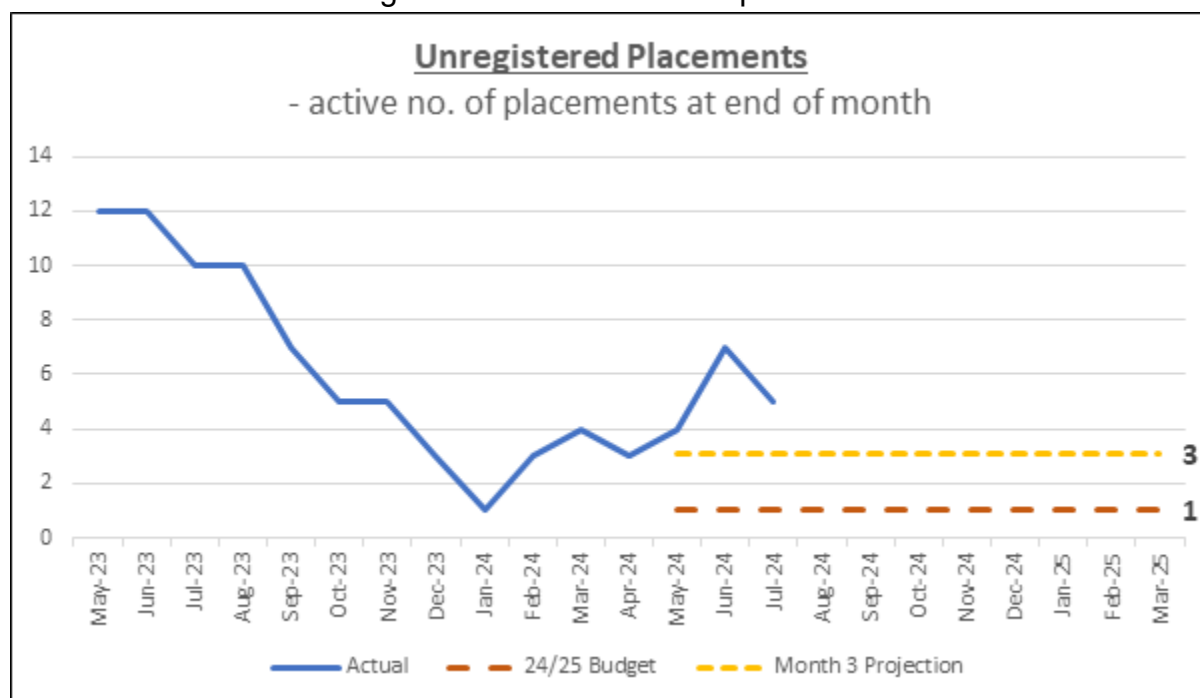
As Councillor Munt reported in September 2023 there are 5 Homes and Horizons homes currently open, and caring for children. The plan to open a further 3 homes by April 2024 has not been possible due to capacity in the planning team and construction delays. Homes 6 and 7 will now open in September 2024 with home 8 planned to open in early 2025. 2 Annexes are due to be in place by the end of September 2024. There are children earmarked for these homes, who are waiting for these provisions to be in place and are mainly currently in unregistered provision.

The Council is also exploring other alternative models of delivery such as social capital and joint ventures with other Local Authorities. These are at a very early stage of development.

2.2 *That the Council should not make any placements in homes which are not registered with Ofsted*

Due to a lack of capacity in the external market locally and nationally, children have continued to be placed in unregistered provision for short periods.

The graph below sets out the numbers and trajectory. It is clear that numbers reduced significantly as Homes and Horizons homes opened in the initial phase and have started to rise again as planned new homes were unable to open. This will course correct to some degree as the new homes open in the next few weeks.



Our aim and aspiration remain that no Somerset children will live in unregistered provision.

2.3 *That the Council considers buying local block (contract) places, to increase capacity/provision.*

We are making progress in setting up block contracts. For young people in supported accommodation, we recently commissioned the Thrive 16+ service which is a block contract across Children's Services and Housing. Alongside the core contract, we are letting smaller blocks through a dynamic purchasing system, further reducing the number of spot-purchased placements.

Block contracts are a guarantee of a specific number of places for Somerset children but it is often not possible to fill all the places, due to the Ofsted requirement to match children's needs. This can result in higher cost places when the economy of scale a block contract offers cannot be fully utilised.

The Children's Commissioning service is exploring small local block contracts again, at lower levels of need, where matching is less complex. If this proves viable it will enable us to bring children home to Somerset, when they are placed at a distance with a small level of saving attached.

2.4 *That the Council pledges that the language used in this area should always refer to 'placements' rather than 'children' when reporting on work to support our children who are looked after (CLA).*

This was agreed by Councillor Munt on behalf of the Executive and continues to be normal practice.

2.5 *That Council lobbies Government through the Local Government Association (LGA) to better support councils with guidance, help with forecasting and impact planning, review regulations and commission an annual 'state of the sector' review.*

Under the previous government, Children's Services nationally, lobbied government on this issue via the LGA and the Association of Directors of Children's Services. We await policy direction from the new government on this issue.

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