

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 Monday, 21 October 2024 at 10.00 am

Present:

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

Cllr Simon Carswell	Cllr Peter Clayton
Cllr Pauline Ham	Cllr Marcus Kravis
Cllr Martin Lovell	Cllr Frances Nicholson
Cllr Jeny Snell	

In attendance:

Cllr Heather Shearer

Other Members present remotely:

Cllr Lucy Trimmell

1 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Councillor John Hunt and from Rev'd Tobie Osmond and Mary Cox – co-opted members. Ruth Hobbs (co-opted member) attended the meeting remotely.

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 18 September 2024 - Agenda Item 3

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families held on Wednesday 18th September 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 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.

A member asked about the position with DBS checks and the Scrutiny Manager confirmed that all Members, including the co-opted members are required to complete a DBS and certain other members have an 'enhanced' DBS. The Scrutiny Manager was asked monitor and to report back if there are any exemptions.

In conclusion, it was agreed that the following items will be added to the work plan:

- LGSCO complaints directed to Somerset – December mtg
- Supported internships
- DoE strategically (successes)
- Role of LCN's / City / Town / Parish Councils in provision of youth support

6 Children's Services - Budget Monitoring update - Month 5 - Agenda Item 6

The Committee received a presentation from Christian Evans, Head of Business Partnering on the [Children's Services Budget Monitoring](#) position as at the end Month 5.

The Committee discussed the presentation in detail and the following points were raised and responded to:

- The Chair sought clarity on the downward trend shown in the numbers presented on Children in Care. Claire Winter, Executive Director – Children, Families and Education, explained that the numbers are affected by various cohorts of children who tend to stay in care till the age of 18 and represent the highest cost age group.
- A member requested that the committee be explained why the changing numbers do not show the impact on the finances, for Children Looked After (CLN). The officers explained that the data is based on a month-by-month cases and thus affected by the same. The officers advised that the department could provide the committee with the age groups of pupils coming into and leaving the care services.
- A member sought clarity on why the placement numbers and forecast numbers for INMS were different. The officers explained that it is because of the number of pupils that have educational and residential provisions. The Chair then recommended there to be an explanation paper to be brought to the committee clarifying dynamics around the budget.
- With regard to the Homes and Horizons, a member asked how many children are held up in the delay in moving and how are we going to make sure that the budget for children is spent on the right things when a Planner is working on the cases - The Executive Director assured the committee that the planning permission has been given and the planning team are looking to recruit. Homes and Horizons issue has been flagged as top priority and work is proceeding accordingly and the new planner is meant to prioritise the Children's services. The Director also gave an update on number of beds available in this project and delays are due to several reasons relating to the

appropriate support needed by young people.

- Education and Transport – clarification sought for overspend and the committee was told that the budget was not balanced this year hence the discrepancy. The discrepancy is due to the education costs and not the transportation costs.
- A member sought clarity on what happens to young people in care once they are 18 years of age – the officers explained the processes in place and the support offer. Asylum seeking children automatically come under the care of Local Authorities and receive the same support as any other child.
- A member requested data from the Corporate Parent Board relating to Children Looked After, The Chair advised that if the papers exist then they would be circulated.
- Difference in exclusions numbers between state-maintained schools and academies – the officers agreed to share the data but advised that the numbers are not evenly distributed but would provide the figures illustrating the disparity.
- The Chair recommended the committee look at the breakdown of placements and cost impact of external county placements in relation to age groups in CLA.

In conclusion, the Chair thanked officers for the presentation, and it was agreed that officers will produce explanation paper on differences between residential / IMS and will provide a provide breakdown of placements out of county by ages for CLA.

7 Funding and provision for children with additional needs - feedback on consultation - Agenda Item 7

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from Amelia Walker, Service Director, Education, providing feedback in the [consultation](#) on funding and provision for children with additional needs, and received an update on the responses received as at [21 October 2024](#).

The Committee discussed the presentation in detail and the following points were raised and responded to:

- the Chair asked what the next step is for these proposals and was advised by the officers that the plan is for the proposals to be taken to the November Executive meeting and will reflect the comments of the Committee.
- a member sought clarity on monitoring of spending – explained that the report to the Executive will cover this issue.
- Is it possible to make the phasing of these proposals as short and financially feasible as possible? There is no surety on phasing timescales currently due to dependence on finance outcomes once the proposals are introduced.
- A member sought clarity on proposal number 5 – incentives and disincentives and officers provided an explanation.
- Members agreed that the plan presented by the officers is a wonderful plan but sought assurance on how to bring it to fruition – money coming from other budgets; all the enablers needed to deliver the proposals are already in place; proposal to change staffing structure quite considerably to have staff

do jobs that are not being done currently; £20.9 million in capital allocation that has not been spent to be brought back and under the Sufficiency Strategy.

- Movement of children around the proposed stages – no mechanism currently in place to coordinate moving between the stages leading to pupils being stuck in spaces that are costing the Council a lot of money; department is working with educational psychology in the pupil referral units to start looking at this and the consultation is the first stage.
- Number of children in crisis that cannot be supported, and should the Executive agree with the proposals on 4th of November 2024, the plan would go into delivery mode as soon as possible. Officers said they are working at pace but due to the time constraints, the programme is being designed in parallel.
- The consultations end today, are there any open-ended questions and where with the feedback be going? – AI support was used to analyse responses and some key areas have been identified, the officers plan on reading all the feedback and add it to the final proposals going to Executive.

In conclusion, the Chair summarised that there is general concern about monitoring the implementation of the plans presented; importance of collaborating with partners but it to be a child-centric approach. He asked to be kept up to date on the implementation feedback and it was agreed that an update will be brought to the March meeting of the Committee.

8 SWAP Audit on Education Health and Care Plan Payments - Agenda Item 8

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from Amelia Walker, Service Director, Education, on presented the outcomes from the recent audit of Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) Payments and highlighted the LGO focus report.

It was noted that there has also been a recent audit on Inclusion Financial Management and Control and this report will be circulated to the Committee when it is available, but the draft report headline is that whilst there 'is work to be done', there are no acute concerns.

The Committee discussed the presentation in detail and the following points were raised and responded to:

- The action plan highlights that the management system would not be changed until March 2025 but in the meantime, there is work to be done to reduce these concerns raised by LGO – officers explained that the action plan reflects the implementation timeline. Since the system is very slow to change, the legislative procurement process guides how the procurement must run and then lead the next step to transfer data safely. The timescales are long due to the legislative guidance and there is no feasible way to make it any faster. The draft specification work has started.
- The number of cases allocated to each case worker, what it presently is, what it historically was and what would be the ideal? – we can inquire and present the numbers; cost of conflict and inability to resolve the situation is what is creating the workload; if there is a low level of conflict, you can deal with an enormous number of cases because it's quite procedural and it will

slide through the system quite easily, so it's the challenge in resolving the conflict to find a successful solution for that child is what is pushing the system to breaking point.

- Have we looked at and audited the complaint system? Is it partly due to our complaint procedure not being as effective as it could be? – the officers explained the service's process of handling the complaints that are received but the lack of staff has led to issues; Claire Winter, Executive Director – Children, Families and Education, explained that she has put in a system where she reviews these complaints personally on a weekly basis, with a team of senior officers to respond in a timely manner. However, these are complex complaints and often require a lot of detailed research and a lot of detailed discussion. The complaints that get sent to LGO are often about lack of appropriate provision that the insufficiency of send provision (discussed previously) does play into the financial penalties that the Ombudsman hands out, which is an issue across the country. The Association of Directors of Children's Services is trying to get some resolution for the same.
- A member asked the Chair if this is something that the committee would like to look at in more depth moving forward around the actual number of complaints that are coming in and the resolution of those so that we aren't fined? – the Chair advised that the Executive Director has already agreed to bring a report to the next meeting, looking at the last couple few years' worth of complaints at the next Scrutiny meeting.
- Support for casework team
- National LGO issue was mentioned but are we getting a local response or a national response? Officers clarified that there was uncertainty around LGO's understanding of the local context and a meeting with their officers has been requested. So far, we have been dealing with Ombudsman complaints on a case-by-case basis rather than looking at them systematically; there is now a higher level of expectation from Ombudsman directives potentially leading to a misunderstanding of our capacity.
- Monitoring AI and technology that we plan to use to support the casework – are exploring how AI can help with compiling casework documents and have found that it helps and frees up time for officers to focus on decision making.
- The Chair identified that we need two things running in parallel - what can we do to correct the hole that we're in and what can we do to help the next phase going forward get better?
- The officers clarified that the starting date detailed in the action plan of 31st March 2025, is delayed and a new system would not be in place for at least 12-18 months. Procurement is a 9-month process, moving the data from one system to the other and the Council's financial situation has echoed that digital transformation. Based on prioritization, the officers are expecting this to be a 2-to-3-year plan.

In conclusion, the Chair said that he will write to the Executive expressing concerns regarding this issue.

The Committee noted the presentation.

The Committee received a [presentation and demonstration](#) from Gary Davies and Gill Bawler, Transformation Manager, on Transform Family View – using data to support integrated working across the partnership.

The officers explained that:

- this is a single digital view of a child or family that aims to break down information barriers for case workers while bringing in holistic support for all involved.
- it would help make sure that all agencies are operating on the same perspectives allowing early identification, timely intervention and harm prevention.
- multiple eyes and ears to monitor and understand emerging risks would increase effective response time.
- all this work has been supported by government grants which were achieved following Josh McAllister’s independent review of Children's Social Care.

The Committee discussed the presentation in detail and noted its huge potential; it is an excellent piece of work, and it would be useful for an all member briefing to be arranged.

On behalf of the Committee the Chair thanked the officers for the excellent presentation.

10 Items for Information - Standing Item - Agenda Item 10

The Committee noted the following items for information:

- (a) Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report – circulated on 19 September 2024
- (b) Funding and provision for children with additional needs - consultation – circulated on 26 September 2024
- (c) Somerset Children & Young People’s Plan – circulated on 10 October 2024

(The meeting ended at 1.15 pm)

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CHAIR