

## Report of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee

Committee Chair: Cllr Leigh Redman

Division and Local Member: All

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### 1. Summary

- 1.1. The Scrutiny for Policies Children and Families Committee is required by the Constitution to make an annual report to the Council and also to provide each other meeting of the Council with a summary progress report and outcomes of scrutiny. This is the fourth annual report of the Committee since our first meeting in May 2015, following the Council's enhanced focus on scrutiny of Children's Services. This report will summarise the regular update reports and cover the work of the Committee's first meetings of 2019.
- 1.2. The main part of our work programme fully supported by the committee during our first 12 months was based on the nine cross cutting Somerset priorities that had been agreed by the Somerset Children's Improvement Board. Our focus since that time has been based on the seven cross cutting Somerset priorities that are the key themes in the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP). We have received an update on progress of the seven improvement programmes at our meetings and continue to ask detailed questions of the Director of Children's Services (DCS) and his team.
- 1.3. Over this time we have been pleased to see significant progress in many areas of the improvement programme, including the reduction in average caseloads and increased senior management capacity in the service. This was recognised during the last Ofsted Inspection visit, which also commented favourably on the work of the Committee.
- 1.4. The Committee has 8 elected Members. We also have 7 co-opted members. There is currently 1 Church representative and 2 vacancies; we have a Parent Governor representative and one vacancy; we have a Schools Compact representative and a representative from the Schools Forum. All of these co-opted members have voting rights on education matters only.
- 1.5. Members of the Council are reminded that:
  - all Members have been invited to attend meetings of all Scrutiny Committees and to contribute freely on any agenda item;
  - any Member could propose a topic for inclusion on the Scrutiny Work Programmes;
  - any Member can be asked by the Committee to contribute information and evidence, and to participate in specific scrutiny reviews.
- 1.6. Since our first meeting in May 2015 we have been pleased to see continuing progress in many areas of the Council's improvement agenda for children and young people and our central focus has remained to constantly ask and seek

reassurance about - **What impact does that have on children in Somerset?**  
We remain committed to retaining a focus on working towards ensuring the best outcomes for Children, Young People and Families in Somerset. We wish to place on record our thanks to those Officers, whom we have tried to support, for their on-going endeavour and hard work for the benefit of children and young people in Somerset.

## **2. Recommendations/Items for consideration**

- 2.1. We recognise that our report is for information, but we would ask Council to consider these measures, suggested in our last Annual report, to help improve Scrutiny in the remainder of this quadrennium:
- Enhanced support for Scrutiny Members such as a Scrutiny Officer role;
  - More Scrutiny Committee and Member involvement and input before Cabinet decisions;
  - Encourage greater Member commitment and involvement as this is crucial to ensuring Scrutiny remains effective;
  - Lead Officer and Cabinet Member attendance at Scrutiny should continue as this is helpful;
  - We are pleased that the outcome tracker we developed has been adopted by the other 2 Scrutiny Committee's to ensure all Scrutiny recommendations are actioned/followed up.

## **2.2. Work Programme**

The Committee Chair and Vice Chair have been working with the Director of Children's Services (DCS) to ensure topics dealt with during scrutiny support the improvement process. When considering reports and policy changes we are constantly assessing what impact does that have on the children of Somerset? We would encourage all Councillors to become more actively involved and aware of their corporate parent responsibilities.

Each of our meetings had specific agenda items to consider the work programme and allow members and officers to suggest items we should scrutinise in more depth. We have also reviewed and updated how we track and monitor our suggested outcomes and/or recommended actions, so we can understand the impact of our work and learn how to better focus our scrutiny work to ensure we have made a difference. In addition to our monthly Committee meetings, officer support/resources allowing, we would like to establish task and finish groups as previously we have found this more focused approached very worthwhile.

Scrutiny Members have endeavoured over time to make suggestions and express opinions to Commissioning/Service Directors and Cabinet Members after discussion and debate. The majority of these have been accepted and incorporated either into the operations of the Council or the decisions of the Cabinet. The Committee wishes to formally place on record its appreciation to those Cabinet Members that have attended our meetings. This has often proved to be helpful both for the Committee and also the Cabinet Member and Lead Officer. We have also been grateful for the benefit of first hand testimony having invited front line staff to attend and participate at our meetings. We are also grateful to those professionals that participated in our task and finish reviews (often at short notice) and we have greatly valued them sharing their frontline knowledge and experience.

We have also been mindful in recent years to reflect the Council's overall corporate focus on improving outcomes for young people across Somerset and ensuring improvement is real and deliverable. In this regard we have purposely sought to create constructive relationships with our sister Scrutiny Committees (Policies and Place) and (Adults and Health) as we have endeavoured to take care in establishing our respective work programmes of future items to avoid duplication and therefore hopefully complement their work. We were pleased to be to hold a joint meeting with the Adults and Health Committee and would wish to do so again to consider improving outcomes for children and young people through better joint working between various agencies and partners.

We continue to be frustrated on occasions regarding our work programme and the production of reports. We agreed to consider our work programme and when we decide future reports and agenda items at the beginning of each meeting. We have welcomed and sought Officer participation in this process of helping us to shape our on-going work programme. However, having agreed our work programme and reports for our future meetings we have been disappointed as reports have continued to be either removed from our agenda or been produced after our agenda has been published and tabled at the meeting.

The late production of reports has affected our ability to consider and digest their contents and subsequently provide constructive challenge and or comment. We accept that as Officers seek to improve outcomes for Children and Young People that their main focus, quite rightly, will be on operational matters however they also need to be able to evidence the progress they are making to our Committee, and recognise we are keen to offer them support in their endeavours but that we are currently reliant on them to explain to us how things are going. We continue to feel that the Committee's involvement in 'pre-decision' Scrutiny is very limited and or recent efforts to offer help and support in the review of the Young Carers service for example were not utilised.

### **2.3. Meetings overview**

The Committee Chair and Vice-Chair have outlined the importance for the Committee to focus on all aspects of the four new priorities of the revised Children and Young Peoples Plan (CYPP) and we agreed that our work programme should be developed through discussions with the Committee Chair, Vice-Chair, DCS and Cabinet Member for Children and Families.

We agreed to have an update on progress made against improvement programme 6 of the former CYPP at each meeting and this proved to be very useful. The Committee Chair requested that each member of the Committee volunteer to act as a champion for each programme of the CYPP and those programmes benefitted from having a member champion and we will look to do something similar with the new CYPP.

We continue to focus, on the outcomes arising from the Ofsted Inspection, and on ensuring the delivery of the new Children and Young Peoples Plan (CYPP). The Vice-Chair worked closely with Officers on the 4 priority themes of the CYPP:

- Supported families;
- Healthy Lives;

- A Great Education;
- Positive Activities.

We have considered a number of reports on a range of topics and these have included:

- Regular updates on the implementation of the Children and Young People's Plan, particularly programme 6;
- Children's Safeguarding;
- Children Leaving Care;
- Addressing Drug and Alcohol Concerns in Families;
- Annual report of Somerset Local Children's Safeguarding Board;
- Care Quality Commission's Review of Healthcare for Children Looked After and Safeguarding in Somerset;
- Early Years and School Place Planning Infrastructure Growth Plan;
- Children's Services – Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) Action Plan Update;
- Updates on Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children;
- Annual Children's Social Care Statutory Customer Feedback report;
- Somerset's Early Help Strategy 2016-2019;
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) updates;
- School Performance & Public examination results;
- The Council's Medium Term Financial Plan (Budget setting process);
- Family Support Services;
- Changes to the Physical Impairment and Medical Support (PIMS) Team.

#### **2.4. Reflections on the last year**

As a Committee we recognise we are still relatively new and that we were created specifically to help improve Children's Services as it was requiring urgent improvement and to some degree support. We therefore have always endeavoured to approach our task as a 'critical friend' by trying to be supportive to Officers and encouraging them to highlight areas of concern to us, whilst hopefully providing a suitably robust challenge to question poor performance and seek reassurance that appropriate action is taken to achieve improvement.

We have on occasion been able to lend our support to requests for additional resources and to offer approval to new ways of working, particularly when the Council collaborates with other agencies to bring about improvement. We do however continue to feel that the Committee's involvement in 'pre-decision' Scrutiny is very limited and our recent efforts to offer help and support in the review of the Young Carers service for example were not utilised.

#### **2.5. Regular meeting updates**

##### **22 March 2019**

We considered 2 reports on the **Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP)**, a quarterly update and a look at the new (CYPP) which our Vice-Chair had worked closely with Officers on producing in its final stages before going live. An update on the progress to deliver a new **Family Support Service (FSS)** for the parents, children and families of Somerset, was considered. We requested an update report be provided for our June meeting to monitor transition of the **Public Health nurses** in to the service.

Our meeting concluded with updates on the changes to **Higher Needs Funding Provision** and the work to support children with Special Education Needs in all Somerset settings, and **School Performance 2018 - National Curriculum Test and Public Examination Results**.

### **26 April 2019**

At this meeting we were pleased to hear about improvements made in fostering and adoption since the introduction of the **Regional Adoption Agency**. We also benefitted from hearing first hand from a young person who spoke very eloquently about experiences of using the **Pathways to Independence (P2i) service**.

A **Young Carers Future Service provision update** report was broadly welcomed and we supported the proposals whilst making some additional recommendations. We were however frustrated by both a lack of detail in the report, to provide further explanation about the proposals, and the answers to questions we asked at our meeting. We felt this limited information did not fully outline the proposals that would be presented to the Cabinet and therefore this had limited our ability to be able to provide constructive comment on this important topic that would impact on vulnerable children, young people and their families.

### **3. Consultations undertaken**

- 3.1. The Committee invites all County Councillors to attend and contribute to its meetings.

### **4. Implications**

- 4.1. The Committee considers carefully, and often asks for further information about the implications as outlined in, the reports considered at its meetings.
- 4.2. For further details of the reports considered by the Committee please contact the author of this report.

### **5. Background papers**

- 5.1. Further information about the Committee including dates of meetings in the new quadrennium, and agendas & reports from previous meetings are available via the Council's website.  
[www.somerset.gov.uk/agendasandpapers](http://www.somerset.gov.uk/agendasandpapers)

**Note:** For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author.