

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Childrens and Families held in the Luttrell Room - County Hall, Taunton TA1 4DY, on Thursday, 4 May 2023 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Leigh Redman (Chair)

Cllr Peter Clayton

Cllr Andy Dingwall (substitute for Cllr S Aujla)

Cllr John Hunt

Cllr Andy Hadley

Cllr Martin Lovell

Cllr Frances Nicholson

Cllr Evie Potts-Jones

Cllr Jeny Snell

Ruth Hobbs – co-opted member

The Revd. Tobie Osmond – co-opted member (attended virtually)

Other Members present:

Cllr Jo Roundell Greene

Cllr Christine Lawrence

Other Members present virtually:

Cllr Andy Kendall

Cllr Heather Shearer

Cllr Tessa Munt

1 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Cllr Suria Aujla (substituted by Cllr Andy Dingwall), Cllr Oliver Patrick (Vice Chair), Cllr Simon Carswell and Cllr Jason Baker.

2 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

There were no further declarations of interest made at the meeting.

3 Minutes of former SCC Scrutiny for Policies, Children & Families Committee held on 6 March 2023 - Agenda Item 3

The minutes of the former SCC Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee meeting held on 6 March 2023 were approved as a true and accurate 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

The Chair asked the Committee to refer to the Committee's work programme, outcome tracker, summary meeting overview of the former Committee in 2022/23 and the Executive's Forward Plan. He advised that members are the 'eyes and ears' of this committee and invited members to suggest items for the work programme. He explained that the outcome tracker is a useful way of keeping track of any queries that come from committee meetings.

The following comments and questions were received and discussed: -

- Do we have any updates on the two workshops to be scheduled? *The Chair advised that the committee would be meeting 6 times a year, and that there would certainly be additional meetings and workshops during the year. The dates of these are to be confirmed.*

6 LA Maintained Schools Core Offer - update / response from last meeting and 2023/24 budgets - Agenda Item 6

The Chair introduced Amelia Walker, Service Director Education, Partnerships and Skills, to present the LA Maintained Schools Core offer. Amelia Walker talked members through a presentation explaining the context and background to the Core Offer, implemented on 1st April 2023 and gave an overview of the current position, concerns and considerations regarding school budgets and how this authority would be helping schools be more financially resilient. She advised that Somerset Council would be focused on improving service standards and working closely with headteachers in the coming term.

Members were asked to consider the report and the new Core Offer Booklet, and the following questions and comments were received and discussed:

- Are the majority of schools content with the Core Offer going forward? *The Service Director advised that in her opinion the schools that have remained within this local authority do appear to be content with the offer, adding that this authority is fully supportive of any schools that have chosen to academize, or been forced to academize under a direct Academy Order. There is a backlog of schools currently going through the academization process, but the team are working with the Department and Education and the Diocese to resolve this and embed efficiencies to improve forward work*

planning.

- The Chair asked members to consider taking up School Governor positions and that signposting, and support can be provided for members to do this.
- Regarding KPI's and sign-ups for year 2 of the Core Offer - when will those be signed off, and when will this authority review those KPI's? *The Service Director advised that the team are having ongoing conversations to ensure that the second year Core Offer is ready to be agreed by January 2024.*
- What is the risk that not all schools will sign up to this Core Offer? *The Service Director reassured members that the risk is very low on this.*
- Regarding delayed sign-off of budgets in our schools this year, how much of an impact has this had on the sign ups to the Core Offer? *This is part of a wider issue on the National Funding Formula, and more work is being done on financial support (budget recovery) and communication with schools facing budgetary difficulties.*
- Relationship Managers appear to be very effective in their roles. But is 4 enough? *The Service Director explained the role and function of the Relationship Managers, adding that these people are connectors who ensure that issues and concerns are addressed quickly. So far feedback on these 4 new posts has been very good.*
- How is the forced academization in under-performing schools managed? Is there a risk that some schools will not be accepted into an existing Trust? *The Service Director acknowledged that there have been problems with some under performing schools not being accepted into Trusts. There are financial incentives for Trusts to take under performing schools which has helped, but it is a difficult situation that is being monitored closely.*
- Is there a possibility that any schools with surplus budgets can share these out with school that have budget deficits? *The Service Director advised members that whilst it is against the law for the authority to provide any extra funding to struggling schools, the authority is permitted to have a clawback scheme in place for balances above a certain level, but that this is very controversial and has not taken place in Somerset.*

In conclusion, the Chair thanked Amelia Walker for attending and thanked all members of the Committee for their robust questioning and in-depth discussion. It was agreed that an update be brought back to the Committee in 6 months.

7 Proposed Steering Group (Task Group) on education standards - Agenda Item 7

Amelia Walker, Service Director, Education, Partnerships and Skills presented agenda item 7 and began with an apology for an error in the published draft document and clarified that the proposal was for a sub-group on education standards.

The sub group will focus on performance data for all schools in Somerset, which is a very complex picture and for this reason, a 'non-public' informal sub-committee approach had been recommended.

The following comments and questions were received and discussed:

- Interest in the work by the Institute for Government mentioned.
- Membership – will be 3 – 5 members and will seek volunteers and expressions of interest (will be open to all members)
- Ruth Hobbs advised that she would be a member of the sub group, representing the Somerset Parent Carer Forum.

The Committee supported the proposal for a sub group on education standards.

8 SEND Strategy and the Accelerated Progress Plan (APP) - Agenda Item 8

The Chair welcomed the Assistant Director Inclusion, Dr Rob Hart and invited the Executive Lead Member for Children and Families, Cllr Tessa Munt to introduce the item.

Cllr Munt explained that the SEND Strategy sets out the priorities and programme for the next 3 years, and that the APP has been developed as a response to areas of weakness outlined in the 2022 Ofsted inspection reports. She added that there has been a lot of engagement to develop this strategy, including a peer review and joint strategic needs assessments among others.

The Assistant Director, Inclusion Dr Rob Hart then introduced Andrew Keefe, Deputy Director for Commissioning, Integrated Care Board, NHS, and took members through a detailed presentation (published within the agenda).

The following comments and questioned were received and discussed with members:

- It would be useful to have a crib sheet, for the benefit of anyone reading who in not familiar with all of the acronyms contained within the documents.
- Regarding performance monitoring and accountability, how is this going to be done? - *Dr Hart advised that a performance dashboard was currently in development, and this would be reported back to members frequently.*
- How does the SEND strategy fit within the Somerset Autism strategy currently in development? *Mr Keefe, advised that although there are elements of this strategy that align with the Autism strategy, there are some differences as well.*
- What age are children when they start getting help with special educational

needs? - Dr Hart assured members that the SEND strategy covers birth to 25years and that schools and early years settings are a crucial part of early intervention and support for children with special educational needs.

In conclusion, the Chair thanked the officers for the presentation and for attending the meeting. The Committee noted the update and agreed that an update be brought back to the Committee in 6 months.

9 Reforms in children's social care - draft consultation response - Agenda Item 9

The Chair welcomed Paul Shallcross, Assistant Director Community and Strategy and Jayne Shelbourn-Barrow, Assistant Director of Childrens Services, and informed the committee that Mr Shallcross would be leaving Somerset Council very soon. The Chair thanked him for all the excellent work he has done for the authority and wished him the best for the future.

Paul Shallcross talked members through the presentation (published within the agenda) and invited the Committee to give their views on the proposed draft consultation response to the strategy and consultation.

The follows comments and questions were received and discussed with members:

- The Chair fully supported the recommendations around data sharing and felt that this was crucial to breaking down the barriers in supporting young people at the earliest opportunities.
- The committee supported the proposed response, and that Somerset is involved at every level doing everything it can (Pathfinder areas), and also to highlight good work being done, including the foster care and recruitment campaign.

It was agreed that the response will be shared with the Committee, for information.

10 Task and Finish Group - sufficiency of external placements - initial response from Executive - Agenda Item 10

The Chair welcomed Cllr Tessa Munt, Executive Lead member for Childrens Services who thanked members of the Task and Finish group for their recommendations and reassured members that it had been seen by the Executive. Cllr Munt then asked Claire Winter, Director Childrens Services to give a verbal update to the Scrutiny, Children and Families Committee on the next steps following the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group, as follows: -

- Somerset Council is currently working with the Shaw Trust on the Homes and Horizons project to create additional placements for children with complex

needs.

- Somerset Council has started to recruit more foster carers and is working hard on sustainability of foster carers.
- Regarding children with complex needs in unregistered provision, these are a high priority for the Homes and Horizons project.
- Regarding buying block contract places to increase capacity, there are some complexities and challenges around this, particularly regarding voids, but it is being considered in some cases.
- In terms of the language points, these are being considered.
- In terms of lobbying government, this was certainly national issue.

The Chair sought clarity on next steps for the Task and Finish group and Jamie Jackson, Governance Manager, Scrutiny advised that a full written response to the Scrutiny, Children and Families Committee would need to be reviewed.

11 Task and Finish Group - home to school transport - Agenda Item 11

The Committee received a verbal update from Dr R Hart, Assistant Director Inclusion on the Task and Finish Group.

Dr Hart advised that Edge Public Solutions were appointed to undertake a review of the Council's home to school transport operations. This has been led by Richard Hall (Director, Edge) and as part of the review, met with members of the Scrutiny Committee task and finish group. He has now prepared a final report and presentation which has been shared with officers for comment. A further meeting with the task and finish group will be held to hear and discuss the report and conclusions. Officers and lead members will meet to agree actions in response to the report recommendations and take any proposals back to the task and finish group in the summer.

The Chair asked that the report to be shared with members at earliest opportunity and for an update to the next meeting of the Committee.

12 Items for Information - Standing Item - Agenda Item 12

The Committee noted the following items for information: -

- (a) Information on Children and Families Board – circulated on 3 May 2023.
- (b) Information on the 'Education for Life' event – circulated on 28 March 2023.

(The meeting ended at 12.48 pm)

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CHAIR