

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 third 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 to Council since April 2017 and also cover the work of the Committee's first meetings of 2018.
- 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 recent Ofsted Inspection visit, which also commented favourably on the work of the Committee.
- 1.4. The Committee has 9 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 CHYPPS 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, agreed at our last meeting, to help improve Scrutiny in the next 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 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 are also reviewing and updating how we track and monitor our suggested outcomes and/or recommended actions so we can understand the impact of our work so we can learn how to better focus our scrutiny work to ensure we have made a difference. In addition to our monthly Committee meetings we have established task and finish groups and this is something we will look to explore again in the months ahead 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 were 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 able to hold our first joint meeting with the Adults and Health Committee when we considered improving outcomes from children and young people through better joint working between various agencies and partners.

We have felt frustration on occasions over the last few years 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 either subsequently been 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.

2.3. Meetings overview

The Committee Chair and Vice-Chair have outlined the importance for the Committee to focus on aspects of the seven priorities of 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 subsequently agreed to have an update on progress made against improvement programme 6 of the CYPP at each meeting and this has proved to be very useful. The Committee Chair has requested that each member of the Committee volunteer to act as a champion for each programme of the CYPP and those programmes have benefitted from having a member champion.

We continue to focus particularly in light of the recent Ofsted Inspection on ensuring the delivery of the Children and Young Peoples Plan (CYPP). The 7 priority themes of the CYPP are:

- Supporting children, families and communities to become more resilient
- Promoting healthy outcomes and giving children the best start in life

- Improving emotional health and wellbeing
- Building skills for life
- Providing help early and effectively
- Achieving effective multi-agency support for more vulnerable children and young people and developing an excellent children's social work service
- Embedding a think family approach across the workforce

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;
- Data Handling and IT;
- 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;
- District Council's work with Vulnerable Families and Housing provision;
- Annual Children's Social Care Statutory Customer Feedback report;
- Somerset's Early Help Strategy 2016-2019;
- Children's Services Workforce Strategy;
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) updates;
- School Performance;
- The Council's Medium Term Financial Plan (Budget setting process);
- Early Years placements;
- Family Support Services;
- Changes to the Physical Impairment and Medical Support (PIMS) Team.

2.4. Reflections on the last year

Family Support Services

Planned changes were first highlighted by Officers and responses received during the consultation exercise showed that the responses received that service users indicated concern that changing the status of a Children's Centres would result in a reduction of available services and that this would mean that families would have to travel further to access services. Although Officers had stressed that a reduction in the number of buildings funded and maintained would not mean any reduction in the services available this did not appear to have been accepted or understood by a significant number of service users as evidenced in the consultation feedback.

Some Members of the Committee felt that there appeared to be little connection between the feedback obtained from the members of the public who participated in the consultation exercise and the proposals/responses proposed by the Council. We noted that amongst those that had participated in the consultation that two thirds were members of the public and a third being people who identified as being users of the Family Support Service.

Committee questioned if a cost benefit type analysis had been conducted to help

gauge the cost of the existing range of provision and what type of additional costs/savings might then arise from going ahead with the proposed changes, therefore a pre and post reconfiguration cost analysis, together with gauging the opportunity cost of reorganising services and how this might effect hard to reach communities. Some members felt this was an important consideration given that contained within the current recommendations was a 'further recommendation' to continue reviewing the provision of family centres in Minehead, Wellington, Chard and Yeovil. The Committee noted in response that Officers were content with the recommendation to de-designate buildings in those locations but to align that with a commitment to work with families in those areas to ensure the correct provision was available. During consideration of these changes the Committee also reflected that the consultation exercise had been restrictive inasmuch as there was no detail or explanation of any alternative provisions/options provided and this had led to a perception that the changes were not being 'user led' and that children and families were 'being done to, rather than doing' themselves.

Physical Impairment and Medical Support (PIMS) team

Planned changes were first highlighted to us by a fellow Councillor who had been contacted by concerned parents. We asked for an update at our March meeting and lots of parents attended and our debate focussed on the causes for concern raised during Public Question time. It was clarified that only SSE staff had been consulted and that redundancy notices had already been issued. It was confirmed that there would be no impact from staff redundancies until May. The Committee expressed concern that the changes could result in a significant change to services and that they had been implemented with no consultation of service users or the Committee. We then asked for the current process to be paused until an update was provided at our April meeting.

In April, after hearing from more concerned parents and service users the Director of Children's Services began by apologising for the way in which the process had been dealt with so far and undertook to improve the Council's contact and communications with those children and families that would be effected by any changes and also all members of staff.

He further noted that during the summer term the Council would hold meetings with all those children and their families to ascertain their views and what they felt they required from the PIMS team in future. He welcomed the recommendations made in a report submitted by the Somerset Parent Carer Forum and repeated his commitment to ensuring all children remained in a mainstream setting and for the Council to obtain the views of the children and families that used the PIMS service.

As a Committee we recognise we are still relatively new and also 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.

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

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