

## **Annual Report of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families 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 provide Full Council with a summary progress report and outcomes of scrutiny. This annual report covers the work of the Scrutiny Committee for the 2020 – 2021 Municipal Year.
- 1.2** The Committee continues to focus on the outcomes arising from the Ofsted Inspection, including the Written Statement of Action, which priorities the areas work on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in the forthcoming 18 – 24 months and on ensuring the delivery of the Children and Young Peoples Plan (CYPP).
- 1.3** Members of the Council are reminded that:
- all Members have been invited to attend meetings of the three 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.
- 1.4** The Committee has 8 elected Members and has up to seven co-opted members - two parent governor representatives (one vacancy), one representative from the Somerset Schools Forum, one representative from the Schools Compact and three church representatives (all still vacant unfortunately). Co-opted members have voting rights on education matters only.

### **2. Background**

#### **2.1 Scrutiny Work Programme**

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. This has led to items being added to the work programme and help guide our future work.

At each meeting we review how we 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. We are grateful for the support of officers in this work, and in particular the support and direction provided by the Deputy Director of Children's Services.

Scrutiny Members have endeavoured through the Committee meetings to make suggestions and express opinions to Directors and Cabinet Members after discussion and debate. We have constructive relationships with our sister Scrutiny Committees, particularly the Scrutiny for Policies, Adults and Health Committee.

I am pleased that we have had some good involvement from members of the public at our meetings – in particular the meeting held on 3 March 2021 when the future schools provision in the Crewkerne and Ilminster area was considered, as well the discussion on elective home education.

## **2.2 Meeting on 6 May 2020**

The main points from the meeting were: -

**Virtual meeting Guidance** – we considered a report outlining the procedures for conducting virtual meetings.

**Covid 19 Assurance** – we considered a detailed report from the Director of Children's Services on the response to the pandemic and the key issues the service was attempting to address with partners, families, and children in Somerset.

**School Exclusions – Task and Finish Group Final Report** – I introduced the report on behalf of the Group. As part of the review of School Exclusions, we visited Schools and a PRU and had held round table discussions with a number of people who had involvement in exclusions, to pick up different perspectives of those involved, including children. The Committee endorsed the report, with some minor amendments. Cabinet responded positively to our report at its meeting in September 2020 and we plan to have a progress update on the recommendations at our meeting in June 2021.

## **Meeting on 9 July 2020**

The main points from the meeting were: -

**Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) Area Inspection Update** – we received a detailed presentation from the Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive Officer of Somerset CCG. We noted the progress and closer working with partners and relationship and involvement with the Regional Schools Commissioner.

## **Meeting on 9 September 2020**

The main points from the meeting were: -

**Children's Services MTFP Update** – we received a report highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on the Children's Services 2020/21 budget, an outline of the significant additional expenditure and adverse impact upon income in both the current and future years and the robust processes put in place to ensure that it maintains its tight financial controls. The Committee will receive regular updates on the impact of COVID-19 and consider the potential decisions the service may need to make to mitigate against significant financial impact on the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2021/22 to 2025/26.

**SENDIAS (Special Educational Needs Disability Information Advice Service) update**- we then received an interesting and informative further update on this new approach – an early help service providing information advice and support to parents, carers, children and young people (up to aged 25) about special educational needs and disability (SEND) within education. The team works with schools to support needs to be met locally. The Committee heard about what has been working well for example, increased levels of co-production. The Committee also heard about challenges experienced for example the increase in requests for EHC assessments and future plans for example hearing the voice of the SEND child and young person more clearly.

**County Ticket update** - we then received a briefing from the Strategic Manager, Access & Additional Learning Need Inclusion Somerset on the decision taken in June 2020 to suspend the county ticket scheme for the 2020/21 academic year, the rationale for the decision, which had not been taken lightly. He also outlined the impact and mitigating actions.

**Unitary update** – we discussed some of the issues around this in so far as it concerns Children's Services, recognising that no decision has been made by the Secretary of State at this stage. We also asked the Director of Children's Services to prepare an issues paper around preparing for transition.

### **Informal meeting on 7 October 2020 – Joint Workshop**

We held a joint Workshop with Scrutiny Policies for Adults and Health. The purpose of this workshop is to understand and explore transitions focussing on aspirations and outcomes for young people aged 14 plus into Adult-life. any actions arising will be articulated and tracked and feedback to the relevant Scrutiny Committee. There will be a progress update in June 2021.

### **Meeting on 12 November 2020**

The main points from the meeting were: -

**Scrutiny Review update** – we received an update from the Scrutiny Manager on the context to the scrutiny review at the Council following the peer challenge in 2018 and received a detailed update on the implementation of the

recommendations which had been approved by the Council in January 2020.

The Chairs of the 3 Scrutiny Committees have now met on 3 occasions and have discussed in particular the following recommendations – namely, approach to work planning / agenda setting (recommendation 5), work programming (recommendation 7) and training (recommendation 10). The aim is to ensure that all recommendations have been fully embedded, and we plan to have a progress update at our meeting in June 2021.

**Update on the Written Statement of Action (WSOA)**- we received a presentation and update from the Director of Children's Services on the WSoA. We were advised that the WSoA had been submitted to Ofsted / Care Quality Commission (CQC).

**Youth Offending Service** – we received a presentation from the Deputy Director of Children's Services together with the Team Leader about the work of the YOS and about the forthcoming HMIP Inspection which is due to take place in 2021. The last inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) was in 2016 with GOOD result and the next inspection is anticipated to be in spring 2021.

**How has COVID-19 impacted on the delivery of the CYPP** – we received a report and presentation from the Partnership Business Manager on how has COVID-19 impacted on the delivery of the children and young people's plan 2019 to 2022. The presentation covered areas to help the Committee understand the implications from the point of view of children and young people, including - support to families, education, health, positive activities. We agreed to have an update / learning from the voice of children and young people and we plan to have this at our meeting in June 2021.

### **Meeting on 2 December 2020**

The main points from the meeting were: -

**Update on the Written Statement of Action (WSOA)** – we received the WSoA which had been submitted to Ofsted / CQC and received an update from the Director of Children's Services on the SEND Improvement Board and the governance arrangements. A re-inspection against the actions outlined in the WSoA will take place within the next 24 months and the Inspectors will expect to see significant improvements against all 9 areas of the plan.

We agreed that, in view of the significant challenges in Somerset, the SEND Improvement Board be encouraged to closely monitor the work joint working improvements needed between partners to support children with Autism and other associated neuro-development conditions. The following areas within the WSoA will be explored in more detail by the Scrutiny Committee: -

- Leadership (Improvement Priority 2)
- ASD (Improvement Priority 5)

- Inclusive Schools (Improvement Priority 6)
- Performance Monitoring

We also agreed that there needed to be focussed work on School Exclusions (this will be picked up at our meeting in June 2021) and for there to be a report on the timeliness and quality of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP).

**Update on the consultation on the future school provision in the Crewkerne and Ilminster area** – we received a report and presentation from the Assistant Director, Education, Partnerships and Skills, updating on the consultation on the future school provision in the Crewkerne and Ilminster area. We were able to make a significant number of comments to Cabinet to help inform the next stage of the process.

**Continuity of Children’s Services through local government reorganisation** - we were advised that the terms of reference for this work were being developed, which will be taken forward via a Task and Finish Group.

### **Meeting on 27 January 2021**

The main points from the meeting were: -

**Children’s Services Data Review** - we received a detailed presentation from the Deputy Director, Children Services, on Children’s Services data trends. The purpose of the presentation was for the Committee to consider children services data and partnership qualitative information to identify areas of possible concern and success in these strategic leadership of the Somerset Children's Partnership; to explore potential hypothesis from the information provided about the effectiveness of specific aspects of that leadership in improving children's lives; and to prioritise the hypothesis the Committee would like to test through work integrated into the Forward Plan.

The presentation was divided into 4 sections- Early help, Children in need of help and protection, Children looked after and Care leavers, with each section broken down into the following- background, data, what the data indicates and potential hypotheses, for further scrutiny by the Committee as part of its forward plan. We welcomed the presentation to help inform the future work of the Committee and agreed that further work is needed to consider what the data implies and to frame and articulate this further.

**Impact of COVID-19 on children & young people’s mental health and wellbeing** – members of the Adults and Health Scrutiny Cttee were also invited to attend the meeting for this agenda item. This was a multi-agency session and purpose of the presentation was for Committee to consider the issue of how big the problem is, what is being done about it and what would make the biggest difference. They provided an outline of national and local statistics come at universal and whole school approaches, Information on mental health support teams the community offer and well-being practitioners and support

for specific groups – CAMHS and Children looked after (CLA).

**Medium Term Financial Plan for Children's Services** - we considered the report from the Director of Finance, which summarised the key areas of specific interest within the Medium-Term Financial Plan to the scrutiny committee for Children and Families. The Committee was asked to consider the proposed budget for 2021-2022 and the indicative budgets for 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 for the children and families services budgets. The Committee was also asked to review specific proposals for changes from previous years and identify any matters for consideration that they would like to highlight to the Cabinet. We asked questions about and for more detail behind the following capital bids – children's residential placements, early years basic need and new school buildings.

**Continuity of Children's Services through local government reorganisation** – we discussed arrangements for the Task & Finish Group looking at the continuity of Children's Services through Local Government reorganisation, including membership, terms of reference and timetable.

### **Meeting on 3 March 2021**

The main points from the meeting were: -

**Elective Home Education** – we received a report and presentation from the Strategic Manager Access and Additional Learning Needs which provided an update on the local authority's work in relation to Elective Home Education (EHE). EHE became a topic of interest to the Committee around 3 years ago when the Local Authority's approach to EHE was unclear, its policy was weak and numbers of EHE children within the county were disproportionately high when compared to similar authority areas. The Committee considered the current data relating to EHE in Somerset; an overview of EHE development work within the Education Safeguarding Service (ESS) and future developmental themes. We welcomed the work being undertaken.

**Overview of prevention work** – we received a presentation from the Strategic Commissioner, children & young people, who provided an overview of the approach to early help and prevention. We also heard from the Programme Director, Safe Families and a Health Visitor on their early help offer.

**Future Schools provision in Crewkerne and Ilminster area** – we discussed the initial findings from this statutory consultation and discussed the proposals in significant detail and agreed the comments we wanted Cabinet to take into account when it considered the issue at its meeting on 17 March 2021. This included - suggestion that clarity is provided on the status of a hard federation in Ilminster, proposed as an interim solution as part of implementation plans, should the governing bodies choose not to pursue this option; for there to be specific reference to SEND in implementation plans; for there to be further

investigation on the issue of whether a Multi Agency Trust solution is possible.

**Continuity of Children's Services through local government reorganisation** – at the meeting we confirmed the membership of the Task and Finish group.

### **Meeting on 16 March 2021**

This was a joint meeting with the Adults and Health Committee to consider the work undertaken on the One Somerset programme, the Government consultation process and the initial 'Stronger Somerset' independent report findings. The focus of the discussion was on the reports on Adult Social Care and Children's Services.

We asked questions and commented on the Children's Services report findings, which were responded to at the meeting. These covered issues such as the Alternative Delivery Model outlined in the 'Stronger Somerset' proposal, which has not been fully outlined so as to provide clarity and detail as to how it may work. The views expressed at this Joint meeting were forwarded to Cabinet (considered at its meeting on 17 March 2021).

## **2.3 Meetings Overview - 2020-21**

We have again considered a broad number of issues at our meetings, and these have included: -

- Children's Services response to COVID-19; impact on delivery of the CYPP; impact on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing
- Medium Term Financial Plan
- The SEND Inspection and then the Written Statement of Action
- Future school provision in Crewkerne and Ilminster area
- Proposed task and finish group – continuity of Children's Services through LG reorganisation
- Children's Services data overview
- Overview of prevention work / early help
- Elective Home Education

## **2.4 Suggestions for the Future**

We look forward to an interesting and informative year ahead.

The unitary debate could have impacts on service delivery, I am pleased that members supported our Task and Finish group, by seeking to learn from Councils that have been through the process, or from our own staff or partners who might be able to identify pitfalls, the report we present to Cabinet as stage one, before the Secretary of State makes his decision, might help give us a head start, so that we can look to mitigate any possible impact a transition from 2 tier to Unitary might have - after all our job as a Committee is also to make children

and family life in Somerset better.

We 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 still feel the Council would benefit from Scrutiny being asked to undertake more pre-Cabinet decision work to help the transition from policy development to implementation.

In our future work we are seeking to focus on the areas we have highlighted in the WSoA and the preventative agenda.

### **3. Consultations Undertaken**

The Committee invites all County Councillors to attend and contribute to its meetings. The Committee Chair and Vice Chair invite prospective report authors to attend their pre-meetings and Lead Officers are engaged in this process. It is still a challenge receiving reports and presentations through in a timely manner.

### **4. Implications**

The Committee considers carefully and often asks for further information about the implications as outlined in the reports considered at its meetings.

For further details about the reports considered by the Committee, please contact the author of this report.

### **5. Background Papers**

Further information about the Committee including dates of meetings and agendas and 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.