

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 report covers the work of the Scrutiny Committee September – November 2021.
- 1.2** The Committee continues to focus on the outcomes arising from the Ofsted Inspection, including the Written Statement of Action (WSOA), which prioritises 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 and following minor changes made at the Council meeting in May 2021, the current position is - two church representatives (one vacancy), two School Governor representatives, one representative from the Somerset Schools Forum (vacant) and two parent governor representatives (both vacant). The 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.

Scrutiny Members have endeavoured through the Committee meetings to make suggestions and express opinions to Directors and Cabinet Members after discussion and debate.

2.2 Meeting on 9 September 2021

The main points from the meeting were: -

SCC response to Afghan Refugee Position – we received an update from the Council’s Corporate Affairs Director, Mr Simon Clifford and the Health Promotion Manager – Resettlement, Ms Brittney Strange.

SCC is the lead authority for co-ordinating the countywide response, with the district councils and voluntary sectors working alongside to support. There is a resettlement webpage with up-to-date information about the current plans, what the accommodation needs are, and what people can do to volunteer or donate: <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/refugee-resettlement/>

The Committee asked detailed questions and made comments, which were responded to by officers and I thanked the officers for the detailed update and work being done by the County Council and partners to support refugees.

Social Care – The Experience of younger children in care – we then received a detailed presentation from the Council’s Strategic Manager CLA and Leaving Care, Ms Jayne Shelbourne-Barrow on the experience of younger children in care.

Task and Finish Group – update – I provided a brief update on the work of the Task and Finish Group on the ‘Continuity of Children’s Services through Local Government Reorganisation’. Work has re started, following the Secretary of State’s decision in July that a single unitary council for the whole of the existing administrative county of Somerset be created in 2023.

Information items circulated to the Scrutiny Committee since the last meeting – the Committee noted that the following information item had been circulated since our last meeting – briefing paper prepared by the Strategic Manager Prevention Services and the Service Manager, Operational Management on the Youth Offending Service – update on HMIP Inspection.

2.3 Meeting on Monday 4 October 2021

This meeting was Chaired by the Vice Chair as I was unable to attend the meeting. The main points from the meeting were: -

Changes to education governance arrangements – we received a presentation from the Council’s Assistant Director Education, Partnerships and Skills, Ms Amelia Walker who provided an outline of changes to the education governance arrangements in Somerset.

In the presentation, Ms Walker highlighted the background to the changes, the new Education Strategy Board and building on early help system. Ms Walker also outlined the proposed changes to the Schools Forum, including the new Constitution and membership, the relationship to other groups and that the new Schools Forum will meet formally in November 2021. The Constitution of the new Schools Forum will be shared with the Committee.

The Committee noted the intention to come to the December meeting of the Committee to outline the analysis to support the development of an education Strategy for Somerset.

On behalf of the Committee, the Vice Chair thanked Ms Walker for the detailed presentation.

ECHP – deep dive – the Council’s Assistant Director Inclusion, Dr Rob Hart provided an update on the Written Statement of Action (WSOA) by way of introduction to the item and the focus on Education, Health and Care – Assessments and Plans, which was presented by the Council’s SEND Strategic Manager Ms Claire Merchant-Jones by way of a PowerPoint presentation.

In the presentation Ms Merchant-Jones referred to the findings from Tribunal Review and that this will be available through the [SEND Improvement Board](#). She had also circulated some detailed information to the Committee on this, and following discussion, the Committee asked that the issue of Tribunals – working of the Appeals process be discussed as a possible item at a future meeting of the Committee. Following discussion, Ms Merchant-Jones also said that she would be happy to provide further information on the figures, for example totals and percentages in number of EHC plans of school age children.

Dr Hart was asked to bring an update report on the WSoA to the December meeting of the Committee.

2.4 Meeting on Monday 8 November 2021

The main points from the meeting were: -

Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews – we received information from the Council’s Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Business Manager, Ms Caroline Dowson, on the process for rapid reviews and local child safeguarding practice reviews. We also considered the learning from the two local child safeguarding practice reviews published in August 2021.

West Somerset Opportunity Area - we received information from the Council's Strategic Manager, West Somerset Opportunity Area Lead, Ms Julia Ridge, highlighting the progress and 'the difference made' 2017 – 2021. We noted the successes and challenges still faced and how the learning can be shared / be beneficial for other Somerset communities. The programme covers 4 key areas – early years, excellence in the classroom, transition to adulthood, business and enterprise.

Trauma Informed Approach – workshop item – we then had an excellent and engaging workshop, facilitated by the Council's Joint Strategic Commissioner Children's and Health, Ms Vikki Hearn.

The workshop covered what the elements of a 'trauma informed Somerset' might look like, the emerging themes and the possible steps which may need to take, based on feedback from a professionals workshop which was held on 1 November.

Information item circulated to the Scrutiny Committee since the last meeting – the Committee noted that the following information item had been circulated since our last meeting - Tribunal summary report – this was the paper previously circulated to members of the Committee on 30 September and prior to the last meeting of the Committee held on 4 October, and recirculated on 29 October 2021.

2.5 Suggestions for the Future

We look forward to an interesting and informative year ahead. Work is continuing on 'reframing' and refocussing the work programme and outcome tracker, so that it better reflects our priorities and areas of focus (the WSoA, preventative agenda and the CYPP).

I am keen to keep the meetings current and adapt to include as much information as possible, to support members ability to participate and grow, recording circulated reports in our minutes. As such we now include on our agenda 'items for information' - these are reports or comments that are shared with members for reading in their own time and members of committee can then contact the author directly with questions. Should members feel that a deeper dive is necessary they can come back to Chair, the Vice Chair (or Clerk), to discuss inclusion in future meetings.

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.

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.

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

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