

## **Lead Member Children's Services: Annual Report**

Cabinet Member: Cllr Frances Nicholson, Cabinet (Lead) Member for Children and Families

Division and Local Member: All

Lead Officer: Julian Wooster, Director of Children's Services

Authors: Claire Winter, Deputy Director Children's Services  
Helen Price, Assistant Director Commissioning  
Amelia Walker, Assistant Director Education Partnerships and Skills  
Rob Hart, Assistant Director – Inclusion

Contact Details: [cwinter@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:cwinter@somerset.gov.uk), [awalker@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:awalker@somerset.gov.uk),  
[rzhart@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:rzhart@somerset.gov.uk), [jwooster@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:jwooster@somerset.gov.uk),  
[hprice@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:hprice@somerset.gov.uk);

### **SUMMARY**

#### **1 THE STRATEGIC & PROFESSIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

1.1 The current statutory guidance, summarising some 300+ statutory duties, has as the central principle the co-ordination of education and children's social care services under a single elected lead member to support the strategic and professional framework within which the safety and the educational, social and emotional needs of children and young people are considered together. In Somerset the lead member is supported by a second cabinet member, the cabinet member for education and public health, who will cover mainstream education and training from compulsory school age upwards in her annual report. This report covers children's social care, inclusion, early years, the West Somerset Opportunity area, commissioning and performance, and the support given to Children's Services by the council as a whole.

1.2 The strategic multi-agency framework for children's services in Somerset, is met by 'Our Plan' – the Somerset's Children and Young People's Plan 2019–2022 <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/how-the-council-works/children-and-young-peoples-plan/>

The plan for 2019–2022 was co-produced through a series of consultation and engagement events in 2018 with children, young people, their families, practitioners and decision-makers from the local authority, health, police and the voluntary and community sector.

1.3 The plan has four priorities to enable our children and young people to be

happy, healthy and prepared for adulthood: Supported Families, Healthy Lives, Great Education and Positive Activities. Each priority has a supporting governing body. Accountability and challenge in relation to these priorities is provided by the Partnership Business Group of the Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership (SSCP) and the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee.

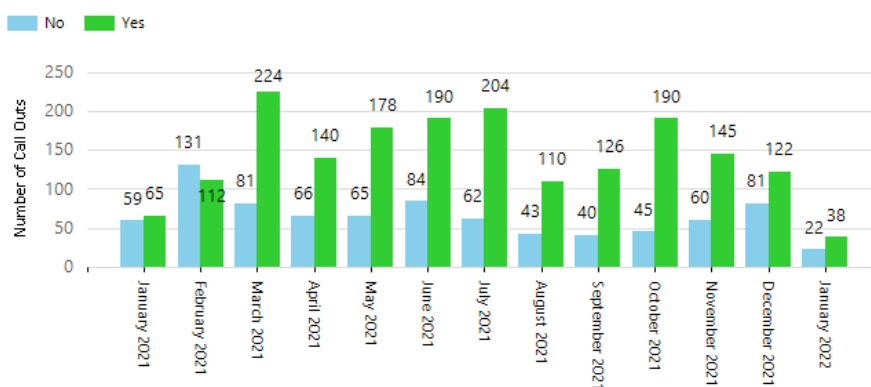
## 2 Children’s Social Care

### 2.1 Edge of Care Services

Edge of Care services continue to be provided within the Family Intervention Service (FIS), operating from 7 am to 10 pm 7 days a week (excluding Christmas Day, NY Day and Easter Sunday only). The current model allows for both crisis intervention through a FIS Duty function and longer-term work through an allocated Family Intervention Worker (FIW) delivering specific interventions as agreed with the responsible social worker.

The duty service has seen 215 requests for support in the first 3 quarters of 2021–2022, of which 1175 were children and young people known to social work teams, and 841 known to early help services. Within these 598 requests are considered ‘unplanned emergency’ work and for this cohort 420 were enabled to remain at home. The year-to-date picture for FIS all duty work is shown:

Has the intervention supported the Young Person to remain at home? - All Areas



### 2.2 Youth Offending Service (YOS)

The YOS continues to prepare for its overdue HMI Probation inspection process.

Caseloads have fallen and now sit at an average of 50 children on post court sentences, plus up to 25 out of court assessment and panel process matters at any given time.

Custody remains low in Somerset although we have seen an increase in County Line related activity and criminal exploitation which led directly to one lengthy sentence for a child (now transferred to probation as over 18) open to social care at the time of offending. We currently have one young person

in custody (serving out a parole recall) and none on remand.

First time entrants to the criminal justice (CJ) system continue to fall, and whilst this is positive it means the remaining children and young people in the CJ system have higher presenting needs and risks leading to an increasing binary rate of reoffending; a deep dive review is currently being completed by business intelligence to identify the common factors for this cohort.

Educational outcomes and opportunities for the YOS cohort has seen significant improvement over the last 12 months, with far fewer children Not in school or training (NEET) or subject to part time timetables:

	Oct 2021 (reported one quarter in arrears so refresh due now)	July 2021	Dec-20	Sep-20
<b>School age full time</b>	54% Yr 11 drop off post end of school year	61% engagement almost doubled since Sept	49%	35%
<b>School age part time</b>	45%	39%	43%	41%
<b>School age not in ETE</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	8%	24%
<b>Post 16 FT ETE</b>	64%	54%	53%	31%
<b>Post 16 PT ETE</b>	17%	20%	4%	11%
<b>Post 16 NEET</b>	19% reduced by 2/3	26% post 16 NEETs halved	43%	58%

Already holder of the Achievement for All Quality Mark in special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) practice for the last 3 years, the YOS was successful in its assessment for the higher Quality Lead award this year.

Key YOS activities going forwards:

- Completion of a multi-agency disproportionality audit to review charge and sentence patterns
- Supporting staff and partners through the YOS inspection process, led by HMI Probation, which is likely to take place in the next 3 months
- Installation of new case management system (NEC Pathways) to replace the unfit for purpose CareWorks system
- Continuing to support staff with training opportunities to better match the national staffing profile – one staff member being supported to train as a SW and remain in YOS, another completing a Qualified Youth Worker award
- Continue to whole service focus on improving ETE opportunities and

outcomes for YOS cohort.

### 2.3 **Children Looked After**

In Somerset we are committed to our role as a corporate parent and continue to promote best outcomes for the children in our care and care leavers.

The Somerset rate of children looked after remains low compared to our statistical neighbours and other southwest authorities. In March 2021, the number of children looked after was 534 compared to 529 in March 2020, so numbers have remained relatively stable.

The growing challenge in Somerset, which is also a national challenge, is ensuring we have sufficient high quality foster homes and placements in Somerset or as close to children's support networks. During this year, the fostering service has undergone a service consultation and restructure and Somerset has commenced work with a strategic partner to look at how we increase provision in county for children with complex needs.

The priorities for the service include ensuring the child or young person's voice is central to service development and their care experience, placement stability and sufficiency and the continued drive to achieve early permanence for our children to promote best outcomes. We recognise that placement planning and reviews is central to improving placement stability and promote a whole service approach to this which starts at the beginning of any intervention.

At the end of March 2021, there were 321 care leavers aged 17-21 open to the service (March 2020, 278). For young people aged 16 and 17 years old, the Leaving Care service worked alongside the CLA social worker to promote a smooth planned transition. Somerset is proud of the work with Care Leavers to promote education, employment, and training and during this year there has been a focus on post pandemic support, in particular emotional health, and wellbeing.

### 2.4 **Adoption**

The Adoption and Special Guardianship Board (ASGLB) headline measures reported in August 2021 "The number of children moving into and through the adoption process continued to decline, and those children who already have a best interest decision are waiting longer for permanence. There continues to be a decline in the number of Agency Decision Maker decisions (ADMs) and Placement Orders (PO), and the number of ADMs being revoked". Somerset's performance is as follows:

- In 2020–2021 the number of children placed for adoption was 41.
- Our placement of children at the earliest opportunity in a fostering for adoption arrangement was 20. The number of children placed in Foster

for Adoption (FFA) was a 17.6% increase on 2019–2020 (17 children placed FFA) and reflects a strong regional adoption agency performance and sustained good early permanence practice by Somerset and the regional adoption agency, AdoptSW.

- In 2020–2021 of the 203 children who left care 31 (15.3%) children left due to an Adoption Order being granted which was a decrease of 26.2% (42 children) on the previous year. There was a decrease in Placement Orders made in 2019–2020 which correlates with the decrease in children adopted in 2020–2021.
- Children made subject to POs: The ASGLB reports a national decrease of 9% in PO granted. In Somerset 38 POs were made as follows showing a slight increase of 5.6%. (36 made in 2019–2020).
- During 2020–2021 50 children had an agency decision of adoption. This is an increase of 2% from the previous year (49 decisions). The ASGLB report a decrease of 4% nationally.

Somerset has a small number of children who can wait a long time (over 18 months) for an adoptive family as we strive to find an adoptive family for as long as deemed appropriate. Currently there are <5 children without a link. The children are often older with complex health and emotional needs. These children are regularly reviewed jointly by the operations manager and Family Finding team manager for AdoptSW. The Agency Decision Maker and Appropriate Adult also monitor this group of children.

### **Special Guardianship**

The Kinship team, based in the council, assesses and supports Special Guardianship arrangements for children. These arrangements are court mandated and provide a permanent home for children away from their birth parents, but often within their wider birth family network. In 2019–2020 there were 50 Special Guardianship assessments and in 2020–2021 there were 64.

### **Adoption Support Fund**

Special Guardians (and, through AdoptSW, adoptive parents) can access funding for placement support such as therapy for the child through the national Adoption Support Fund. 39 children were supported during 2020/21 and for 2021–2022 42 children have been identified to receive support, totalling £138,126.40.

## 2.5 **Assessment and Safeguarding**

Changes to the structure of the Front Door are embedding, continuing the shift towards an early help-led upwards escalation model, with input from the statutory social work team being sought for only those children where there is clear evidence of harm or high need.

The pandemic has continued to impact significantly on children and families in Somerset over the last 12 months, and this impact is starting to be evidenced in the work seen within assessment and safeguarding teams. Although performance information does not show a sustained increase in demand, there is significant anecdotal evidence that the complexity of work within the teams is increasing. We have seen in particular a number of teenage young women with high level emotional health difficulties who have escalated rapidly through the system exacerbated by the dearth of suitable high tariff placements. These young people are highly resource intensive, both in terms of social work time and cost.

Numbers of children subject to Child Protection (CP) and Child in Need (CIN) plans have remained broadly stable over the year, despite the impact of lockdowns, and the challenges of recruiting to social work vacancies. The re-referral rate has continued to fall, and is lower than national and regional neighbours, evidencing that interventions are effective and families are not needing to come back into the service for further support. These achievements speak to the huge effort and commitment of our staff, and we are grateful for their relentless focus on keeping children in Somerset safe. This effort is not without cost however as we have seen increasing rates of staff absent through work related stress and anxiety.

The rollout and embedding of the Family Safeguarding (FSG) model, a key focus for the last year, has been a great success despite the challenges of doing so in the pandemic, and accelerating the rollout to be county wide in the first year. During this time, we have recruited and inducted 27 adult workers into 8 teams across the county. We have trained more than 360 practitioners in the Motivational Interviewing (MI) approach (a key element of FSG) as well as providing FSG workshops to all staff to support our focus on needs and proportionate intervention. This has taken place alongside a programme of team and culture building to support integration of new workers and ensure that adults' and children's workers' roles support and complement each other. The interim independent evaluation report has been completed and evidences the success of the rollout, highlighting high levels of job satisfaction amongst staff, high regard for the use of MI as a practice tool and for Group case Supervision as a forum for developing a shared understanding of risk with adults' practitioners.

Those safeguarding social workers who remain outside the FSG model (Wider

Safeguarding teams) have also enjoyed a positive year, developing their focus on exploitation issues, working with parents with Learning Difficulties and a focus on neglect.

## 2.6 **The Quality Assurance Service**

The Quality Assurance (QA) Service continues to make good progress in all areas of QA activity. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and Child Protection Co-ordinators (CPCs) routinely oversee plans for children in Somerset who are looked after or who have a CP plan. Oversight, challenge and scrutiny is increasingly embedded and impacting on practice and outcomes. Pre-meeting consultations provide an opportunity for good meeting preparation for families so that the right people attend, the voice of the child informs planning, and give an additional opportunity for reflection about the needs of the child and family, enable alternative perspectives to be considered and provide a platform to think about courses of action. IROs and CPCs monitor the plans of children who are looked after or have a CP plan to ensure they progress in a timely way and promptly challenge any drift and delay. The impact of IROs and CPCs is consistently seen in strengths based and supportive challenge to social workers and team managers in case recordings through use of the QA issue resolution process. The improvement in children's voices being heard in CP conferences through Route 1 Advocacy is consistently maintained at 95%.

A peer review of QA in Somerset was undertaken by Dorset Council in June 2021. The peer review commented on the organisation being one that sees QA as fundamental to the ongoing improvement of services. Review of our routine QA activity including feedback from professionals and families, practice evaluations, moderations, multi-agency practice evaluations (MAPE), dip reviews and team diagnostics found evidence of a well-embedded culture of striving for great performance and a culture of learning. We have made significant progress in the gathering and analysis of feedback from children and families. This has been achieved through the introduction of a system which enables feedback collection and analysis to inform of our strengths and areas where focused improvements are required so that our service provision improves the lives of children and families. The peer review challenge reported on finding a strong theme of 'feedback, feedback, feedback', that is, seeking the experiences of families as front and centre to QA practice.

We have focused on a programme of MAPEs, bringing together professionals from all agencies working with a child to evaluate the effectiveness of our interventions in improving the child's outcomes. The peer challenge found:

The involvement of partners in QA activity is a clear strength. There are processes that actively enable partner involvement (MAPE) and

we heard how well these are regarded by partner agencies. As a result, we believe children, young people and families are likely to experience the right support at the right time and feel part of the solutions and positive change.

The work of the QA team has been expanded to develop quality assurance processes and audits in SEND. An area of focus now is to build on the success of MAPEs, introducing these for children with SEND. This will provide opportunities for working with partners to improve quality and for families to share their views and experiences. The identification of areas of strength and for development will enable us to continue to drive forward improvements to service provision for children with SEND.

## 2.7 **Children with Disabilities**

Children and young people who have a disability are entitled by law to an assessment of their needs. In Children's Social Care in Somerset, we are committed to ensuring that children and young people with disabilities are seen as children first. We want to ensure that our children and families receive the right support in the right place at the right time. With this in mind the Children with Disabilities Service (CWD) continues to provide a proportionate, graduated response to disabled children and their families.

The Children with Disabilities Social Work team provides a service to children and young people whose needs are assessed as requiring a social worker, via a CIN, CP or Child Looked After plan. The Family Intervention workers in our Early Support team provide a service to children whose needs are assessed as benefiting from this service. The Resource team, comprising the Community Inclusion and Activity team and the Somerset Supporters team can provide the assessment and services required at a lower level.

The CWD service is rightly proud of the creative and flexible response that teams have provided during the pandemic, allowing them to continue to support some of our most vulnerable children. Some initiatives developed during lockdown included:

Creative use of the short breaks offers:

- Flexible use of direct payments to families to adapt support to lockdown restrictions
- Grant funding providers to produce online resources including, for example, family cooking classes
- Provision of activity packs for families to support children out of school
- Linking with vulnerable pupil hub meetings to monitor and support disabled children who were not able to attend school due to Covid.

The service has also been fully engaged in supporting the SEND written statement of action work, including playing a leading role in Improvement



Priority 5 – developing a neurodiversity pathway. This builds on excellent progress by the Community Inclusion and Activity team in ensuring that timely social care information is provided for all children who are being assessed for an Education Health and Care Plan, including where they have no involvement with social care services.

The service continues to make progress in breaking down real and perceived barriers between CWD teams and the wider Children's Social Care (CSC) service. CWD managers are fully integrated into wider management teams, and this is impacting positively on the perception of the service as part of the wider CSC family. An integration of the training offer, from Early Help through to statutory services, is helping to embed this culture.

## 2.8 **Listening to the Voice of the Child and Young Person**

It has been a busy year for the Participation and Engagement team as more colleagues and associates have wanted to engage with young people. Young people's capacity to engage has also been limited at times when school and college work has been their priority; however, we have been able to request from a pool of between 80 and 90 young people, and broader requests have heard from 2500+ young people. We also build in time to develop the skills and knowledge of the young people we work with in the spirit of reciprocity; including thank you letters from senior leaders, certificates, references, gift vouchers, Christmas parties and away days.

### **SSCP Youth Forum**

The Youth Forum is open to any young person in Somerset aged 10–18 (up to 25 if they have SEND) and exists to influence and challenge the SSCP. The group launched their [LADO film](#) and [GP Safeguarding](#) films; ran an 'Is Somerset a Child Friendly County?' event for the new Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) and presented at the SSCP Conference on planning the next CYPP; met with SSCP partners at half term to give an annual overview; wrote the foreword and contributed to the SSCP Annual Report to the Health & Wellbeing Board; facilitated consultations on the Bus Improvement projects and undertook some research on Positive Male Role Models which they presented at SSCP December Forum. Numbers for this group are relatively small and recruitment via our new social media platforms has begun.

### **Somerset Youth Parliament**

The group is large and thriving and very enthusiastic. Members of Somerset's Youth Parliament have produced a How to Guide for teachers regarding sexual assault in schools; designed posters for their campaign on Domestic Violence; grant funded 5 local infrastructure organisations to develop youth social action; worked on development of school councils; employed a Young Person's Champion for Youth Parliament (summer job); co-delivered Pharmacist training on sexual health; were interviewed on BBC Radio Somerset re knife crime; facilitated consultations with young people on the new unitary processes; Young Person's Champion for Health and Wellbeing produced a tool kit for schools to use on the Health & Wellbeing Framework; held 2 successful Climate Emergency open consultation events for young people with the Climate Emergency strategy team;

held successful elections for new Members of Youth Parliament which attracted 2,400 student votes resulting in 3 newly elected MYPs (3 Deputies and new Advisory Group Members) in place to start their new term of office from March 2022/2024.

### **Somerset In Care Council & Somerset Leaving Care Council (SiCC and SLCC)**

The group started working with their new Participation Worker in July 2021. They produced two films for Route One Advocacy films on Advocacy and Independent Visitors for the R1A website; they co-produced a Listening to the Voice of the Child in Decision Making film and guidance for children's social care; they sat on Step Up to Social Work and Route 1 interviews. They facilitated the organisation of the Annual Achievement Awards 2021 – 367 nominations and 41 for Children's Social Care Worker of the Year Award welcoming 120 guests to Dillington House for the event; they worked with Children's Commissioning and Research in Practice on a Foster Care survey consultation; members of SiCC and SLCC were involved with 5 layers of engagement for the commissioning for the Somerset Homes for Children Strategic partnership, including inspecting children's homes around the UK; they attended their Away Day focused on team building and young people worked together on low ropes and raft building activities, and they co-produced the draft Corporate Parenting Strategy 2022–2025. The group shrank by over half during the lockdown times as they were not happy to engage on Teams/Zoom. Since we started holding face to face meetings in July 2021 the group has been steadily growing and we continue to look for new recruits.

### **The UnStoppables**

The group consists of around 12 members aged between 14 and 24 years. It has been a busy year for the UnStoppables who have been very involved in the SEND written statement of action. Particular highlights have been working on the Community Inclusion and Activities team holiday activity calendar; supporting the development of the Collaboration Framework; holding consultations with over 150 students from primary and secondary schools about what is working and what is not working in relation to [inclusion in education](#); recruiting a longer term Young Person's Champion ; meeting face-to-face again after the Covid restrictions were loosened; running a Summer Speak Up Series events in the school holidays around the county developing skills so young people with SEND are able to have a voice. Their lived experience has been included in the launch of the Inclusion Champions' training and offering 20 weeks. work experience to a student with SEND to produce a 'comic-style' form of Transitions into Adulthood leaflet.

### **Comms & Engagement**

We welcomed a new post into the team in January 21 and recruited a graphic designer with an ambition to turn the voices of children and young people into engaging and strategic pieces of work for use across Children's Services and beyond. This also helped us to launch our new social media platforms – Instagram, Facebook and Twitter and we have made several films and animations with children and young people including a Complaints animation with the Customer Experience team, coproduced animations with Route One, recruitment films for SiCC and SLCC, and worked with SSCP and the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to produce awareness raising and training films. We have also worked with the Youth Offending Service and the Children's Commissioning team.

### **Participation Workers Network**

This network is thriving with 40+ members from councils, education, police, health and the voluntary sector, facilitated by the SCC Participation and Engagement team. This year we have produced a map of Participation Opportunities for children and young people; refreshed and re launched the Participation Toolkit via Local Offer website for the SEND Improvement workstreams and met with new Police & Crime Commissioner to support him to better hear the voice of children and young people.

## **3 Inclusion**

### **3.1 Joint Ofsted/CQC inspection report into SEND services**

A joint written statement of action owned by Somerset County Council (SCC) and Somerset's CCG was published in late 2020 to deliver a range of interventions to improve the SEND service by strengthening support and improving the lives of children and young people with SEND and their families.

In the last year work has included laying the foundations for improvement such as an Outcomes Framework, clearing backlogs of assessments and improving assessment timescales, launching an inclusion inquiry and developing a 'Somerset Model' of inclusion in schools. Most importantly we have worked with children, young people and families to understand what is important to them.

Work in the last year has been received positively by the DfE and NHS Regional Advisers, who carry out regular monitoring visits. Most recently they noted that "despite intense pressures caused by Covid, together with LGR and ICS developments, the local area has maintained good progress in implementing the written statement of action."

### **3.2 Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans**

In 2021, 1033 requests for statutory assessment were made and 876 EHC plans have been issued. This compares with 1000 requests made in 2020 and 1056 plans issued.

Performance against 20-weeks has improved considerably with performance moving from 34% in 2020 to 61% in 2021. The current national average for completion of EHC plans in 20-weeks is 59%.

In 2020 the local Authority received and processed 2277 Annual Reviews of EHC plans and amended 1278 of these.

In 2021 the number of Annual Reviews received and reviewed was 2932 and 1041 of these plans have been amended.

The number of mediations requested has improved with 74 mediations requested in 2021 compared with 55 in 2020.

The number of Tribunals registered against the Local Authority remains consistent with previous years meaning that approximately 5% of decisions made by the LA are challenged through the appeal process.

### 3.3 **Permanent Exclusions**

Permanent exclusion numbers reduced to 68 in the 2020/21 academic year and even after factoring in the winter lockdown, represented a significant reduction in permanent exclusions when compared to previous academic years.

In the 2021–2022 academic year, the use of permanent exclusion has increased dramatically with 53 being recorded to date. If the trend continues, this academic year stands to be Somerset’s highest in terms of permanent exclusion and cements the area’s place as an exclusion outlier.

The reasons for exclusion remain consistent with previous years, with ‘Persistent Disruptive Behaviour’ being the most commonly used reason, followed by ‘Verbal Abuse/Threat to Adult’ and ‘Physical Assault Against Pupil’.

The increased use of permanent exclusion comes at a time when officers are working with schools and other partners to further develop Inclusion Partnerships and ensure the high needs resource that is channelled through Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Behaviour Partnerships is being used to address need.

It’s also worth noting that schools will begin contributing towards discretionary partnership places in PRUs from January 2022 and that this may have been a consideration for schools when excluding.

### 3.4 **Safeguarding in Education**

The primary focus of the Education Safeguarding Service (ESS) is to support education providers to develop robust safeguarding practices.

Regular briefings for schools’ designated safeguarding leads have been delivered over the course of the year and the move to Teams has resulted in higher attendances.

A significant amount of work has been undertaken to revise and improve the annual safeguarding audit for schools to make it more accessible for users and inform the targeting of supportive resource within ESS.

The service provides regular updates on its work to the Education Safeguarding Partnership (a sub-group of the SSCP) and responds to issues/themes that are raised in that forum by representatives from across the sector.

### **Elective Home Education (EHE)**

After high levels of EHE starts in the Autumn term of the 2020/21 academic year, numbers have stabilised and returned to pre-pandemic levels in the 2021–2022 academic year.

All new 'starts' are assessed for vulnerability and where there are concerns, ESS works with families and other professionals to return the children to formal education. In a small number of cases this requires intervention from the courts, and this has been difficult to progress during the pandemic due to the limited capacity of the courts.

In this academic year, 92 EHE children have already returned to formal education.

### **School Attendance Monitoring**

A revised School Attendance Monitoring Protocol was published for the 2021–2022 academic year.

Given the impact of Coronavirus, school attendance figures are not being monitored as rigorously, but where thresholds for permanent exclusion, suspension and elective home education are met, these are being explored with schools in a supportive way.

It also enables officers to identify schools which may benefit from a wider discussion in the Schools Quarterly Performance Review Meeting process.

## **3.5 Education for Children Looked After**

We have seen a significant improvement in the attainment data for our Children Looked After this year, with the indicator for this being the Key Stage 4, GCSE, attainment. Over 30% of our eligible cohort achieved a pass in English and Maths, compared with 17% last year.

The new electronic platform (ePEP) for the Personal Education Plan (PEP) is now fully launched and working successfully. Schools and partners are providing us with feedback to ensure it is working effectively for them. We can access a broad range of data, to include RAG rating of PEPs, impact of interventions, and progress towards targets.

We continue to track the impact of our work against a number of key performance indicators, which are demonstrating a reduction in children missing out on their education, either through exclusion, poor attendance, or lack of school places. The impact of Covid continues to be apparent for

children who are struggling to re-engage with formal school-based education, and this continues to be a focus of our work.

The staff team is now stable and established. There have been two recent appointments, with the addition of an Advisory Teacher with an SEMH specialism, and an Advisory Teacher with an Early Years specialism. We have also appointed a new Post-16 Lead Advisory Teacher, who joined the team in January and will work closely with the FE providers, and partners across the authority.

There continue to be service priorities which we are working on, including improving our ability to monitor and track attendance accurately. The attendance app which we currently use is reliant on school completing a daily return, which is proving challenging for them in the currently climate. We are looking into alternative routes for gathering attendance data and this will be a priority over the coming months.

From September 2021 – Virtual School Heads were asked to extend their remit in order to offer strategic education oversight for children with Social Workers for one year. This is known as 'Extension of Duties'. Through careful engagement of partners, we are shaping up and clarifying our extension of duties offer. This will involve training for those working with children with social workers, a dedicated advice email address, and some available funding which will be allocated to schools wishing to implement interventions for the children and then evaluate their impact. We are working with neighbouring authorities and sharing best practice ideas on how the additional funding can be used to the greatest effect.

The appointment of a new post-16 Lead Advisory Teacher will support with the development of transition to post-16 education for CLA – we have worked closely with our post-16 partners this year, ensuring regular attendance at meetings, and their involvement in developments such as the ePEP and attendance monitoring. The colleges are not routinely invited to the Summer PEP meeting for the young people, and this is largely due to uncertainty about post-16 destinations. We need to ensure there is a process for facilitating links with colleges prior to transition, so they feel well equipped to meet the needs of the young people coming to them at Year 12.

### 3.6 **SEND Advisory Services**

#### **Autism & Communication Service Advisory Teachers**

A small highly valued team with a focus on building capacity in education

settings. Highlights during the academic year 2020–2021 include:

- 624 involvements in a variety of individual pieces of casework
- 4979 teaching staff engaged in Autism Education Trust training
- Developed bespoke training packages and toolkits across a range of topics, including Inclusive Communication and Sensory Processing Differences
- Delivered 6-week Cygnet parenting courses
- Participated in the Autism Preassessment Pathway engagement events and supported the embedding of the Preassessment Pathway
- 

Challenges in 2021–2022 include:

- An unstable workforce due to short staffing and 39% temporary staffing as a result of the service being under review.

Some Key priorities for 2021–2022 include:

- Extend traded offer to include comprehensive Assess, Plan, Do and Review model of support
- Be actively involved in the co-production of a Speech Language and Communication Needs Strategy and the Autism Post Assessment Pathway
- Participate in the Social Communication, Emotional Regulation, Transactional Supports (SCERTS) training with the view of becoming SCERTS Champions.

### **Children's Autism Outreach Team (CAOT)**

This team are a small highly valued team of family outreach workers who support families through home visits and arranging and supporting out of school clubs and school holiday events for Autistic CYP aged up to 13 years.

During the academic year 2020–2021 highlights included:

- 218 Home Visits (bearing in mind the lockdown period)
- 3175 phone calls with families
- 6 holiday events in which 118 families participated, monthly coffee mornings (some virtual) and clubs outside lockdown periods.

The main challenge during the year 2021–2022 is a reduced workforce due to sickness, maternity and a member of the team leaving, which has caused a waiting list.

Main priorities include:

- Gaining a better understanding of SEND Statutory processes and consider how CAOT can be supportive due to their relationships with families

- Participating in the co-production of the Autism Post Assessment Pathway.

### **Sensory, Physical and Occupational Therapy Service (SPOT)**

SPOT services are made up of four teams: sensory teams – hearing support team and vision support team and physical teams – physical impairment and medical support team and occupational therapy team.

Highlights of the year:

- Reviewing all casework, reducing duplication and gaps
- Developed new ways of working – balancing virtual and face to face support
- Benchmarking of all services and rebalancing provision where required
- Identification of all statutory duties and ensuring delivery of these
- Identification of appropriate commissioners for each statutory duty
- Feedback from service users remains consistently high for all teams with most ratings a 5 out of 5.

For the coming year our main challenges are:

- Upskilling the teams to provide professional contribution to EHC plans.
- Develop joint funded pathways between Education, Social care and Health services including provision of therapy and equipment.
- Ensure succession planning for the specialist areas of knowledge (retainment and recruitment).

### **Educational Psychology Service (EPS)**

Highlights of the year:

- 96% of EP statutory advice was submitted within the 6-week timeframe – a strong improvement on previous years
- Parents rate the EP advice very highly, with an average of 4.8/5 for overall quality
- Every school has a linked EP, and all schools receive support via planning meetings and Joint Pyramid for Inclusion (JPI) meetings. These have been rated highly from settings who feel well supported
- School trading and traded training has increased 55% during 2021–2022 in comparison to previous year.

The traded offer to schools and settings promotes early identification of additional needs and ensure that these needs are appropriately provided for. This involves direct work with children and young people, consultation with adults, systemic support, supervision and a comprehensive training offer.



Moving forward, there is a focus on recruitment as this is a key challenge area for the service and wider profession. Key targets are:

- Increase early intervention so that at least 30% of children for whom statutory assessment requests are made will be known the EPS
- Supporting schools to meet the needs of those children with EHC plans so the number of Statutory Tribunal appeals is reduced from the baseline number (academic year -Sep 2021).
- 25% of Somerset schools will have a trained senior Mental Health Lead.

### **Early Years SEND Support Services:**

Highlights of the year:

- 220 school entry planning meetings facilitated to support transition into school
- Monitoring of agreed outcomes at school entry plan review meetings at beginning of academic year showed 72% of children met at least 80% of their agreed outcomes
- 48 children finished portage interventions in the academic year 2020–2021  
96% of children met or exceeded the identified outcomes on their portage plans.  
100% evaluation responses rated the home visiting intervention as good or excellent (92% rated as excellent).
- Portage Starting School Group was run virtually in the summer term  
100% evaluation responses indicated the portage starting school group had increased parent confidence in their child's transition to school.
- Between April 2021 and October 2021, the portage waiting list numbers and waiting times have significantly reduced. The number of children on the waiting list decreased from 71 to 28. The average waiting time decreased from 11.9 months to 3.8 months. The proportion of children on the waiting list waiting longer than 1 year for intervention reduced from 44% to 0%.

This year the service will focus on:

- the implementation plan following the formal restructure of the Portage and Early Years Area Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) services into one team
- Reducing waiting times for home visiting interventions to less than 6 months
- Increasing access to stay and play group interventions so groups are established in at least 6 of 8 Multi-Agency Identification and Support in the Early Years system areas
- The Starting School Group will become a regular annual offer to develop parent confidence in the transition to school.

### **Learning Support Team**

The Learning Support team continues to work closely with our schools to ensure they are well supported in making appropriate provision for the children within their communities. There has been a high take up of our Strategic SEND and Inclusion Discussion (SSID) meetings this year, we have had 218 schools request a meeting which is an increase of 29 schools from last year. The school feedback from the SSID process is positive and provides the team with a wealth of information and data, enabling effective planning of our school training offer.

There are 23 SENCOs participating in the SEN Award programme this year, which the Learning Support team deliver on behalf of Plymouth University. The SENCO workforce continues to engage in CPD and developments, indicating that school leaders understand the importance of the SENCO position.

## **4 Education – Early Years**

### **Childcare during the pandemic**

The pandemic has presented enormous challenges to the sector, and our significant focus during this time has been on providing support to enable this critical provision to remain operational.

Communication is an important part of what we do. Working collaboratively with Public Health, throughout the pandemic we have circulated regular Covid updates, and our web page “Coronavirus Updates for Early Years” has provided the latest information. Social media and a monthly newsletter have been used to remind the sector of the most up to date guidance.

We have a system of Link Workers to support early years settings so that every provider has a named individual who is their single point of contact for the local authority.

While early years settings have been open for all children, providers have been encouraged to monitor attendance, particularly of vulnerable children.

The pandemic has created significant financial pressures. To mitigate the impact, we provided Covid recovery funding in the form of one-off grant payments, which were made available to childminders and group settings registered to offer the Early Years Entitlement. In July 2021 for childminders this was £400 and for Group Settings £1598.

Covid Hardship grants remain available now and will do so until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022. We continue to bid for additional funding for 2022–2023 to support providers who continue to suffer with short term closures, difficulties with recruitment and continuing financial pressures. Sustainability grants have

always been available on an annual basis and that remains the case.

### **Sustainability and quality of childcare provision 2021**

Standards across the childcare sector compare favourably with national standards. Good providers make up 79% of all current inspection judgements, which is the same as the national level, and 18% of providers hold a current judgement of outstanding, higher than the national level of 17%.

Due to these unprecedented pressures, in 2021, five group settings closed without being replaced. One group setting closed but the local school opened a new pre-school, as a welcome replacement of places for that community. In addition, six previously private- or voluntary-run settings became school- or academy-run. Three new group childcare settings opened, two privately run and one as part of a new primary school. One further group setting is in the process of registering with Ofsted. Forty-eight childminders closed their businesses, and 14 new childminders were registered, a net loss of 34 childminders. Six new childminders are in the process of registering with Ofsted.

### **Early Years Communities (EYC)**

One of our highest priorities for improvement in the early years sector is workforce development. Somerset has a well-developed system of self-improvement through collaboration, through the Early Years Communities which are area-based groups of providers who share training and development through pooled budgets.

The EYC delivery of CPD in 2021 included virtual formats as well as some face-to-face training. Each of the communities is actively planning their next cycle of CPD sessions and some communities are starting to bring in income to cover costs and therefore moving towards becoming self-sufficient.

Ninety-five practitioners have completed "All Emotions are OK" training which is supporting our youngest children to cope with impact of the pandemic. The "My First Emotions" Toolkits are being rolled out to every early year's provider and primary/infant/first school in the county. The resources are useful aids to help support children's emotional wellbeing and have been positively received.

## **5 West Somerset Opportunity Area**

### **Delivering the ambition**

The DfE identified West Somerset as an Opportunity Area (OA) which would receive additional funding due to the lack of social mobility. The district was

324<sup>th</sup> out of 324 local authority areas in England. The programme was for 3 years and was due to be completed in 2020, however an additional year's funding was set to help embed the programme. During 2021 the DfE agreed to a 5<sup>th</sup> year of funding to share learning with other areas, consolidate, build a legacy and evaluate the work. The project is now due to be completed in August 2022 and the total value has been £6m. The focus for Year 5 is to make sure the work of the first four years becomes sustainable in the future, so we are working with partners to ensure this happens. In October we held a conference to consider the success of the programme so far and the remaining challenges. There was a consensus that the community would benefit from a legacy partnership model to develop a collective impact model.

The programme has four key areas: Early Years, Excellence in the classroom, Transition to Adulthood and Business and Enterprise. Each area has been based on testing results at various key stages, however data collection has been impeded due to Covid and the cessation of assessment in schools. Despite managing Covid outbreaks the West Somerset staff in early years, schools, colleges and the voluntary sector have all worked incredibly hard to continue to deliver the OA plan as well as keeping their settings and services open.

Overall, one of the significant changes seen through the 4 years of the OA is the collaboration between the voluntary sector, which is very strong in West Somerset, providing essential services including food to many families. Our voluntary sector has secured additional funding and is setting up a collaboration group to manage voluntary engagement in West Somerset. The collaboration group is to be launched in early January 2022 and is to be called Kite.

### **Early Years**

Our focus has been on developing good maternal mental health with the CCG, and Public Health. We worked with a children's communication charity ICAN and a local charity Homestart West Somerset to develop speaking and reading with children at home and to enhance physical activity working with Youth Sports Trust and their Healthy Movers project. [Healthy Movers - tackling school readiness through play - YouTube](#)

We have provided parenting support programmes working with Homestart and other local charitable groups: Parents as Early Education Partners (PEEP), Tunning into TOTS, Families Unite through Nature, and with Exmoor National Park Authority.

Our Nurseries and pre-schools have received high-quality training investing in physical activity, maths, speech and Language and SEND. We have "twinned" with Mendip, and Weymouth and Portland.

## **Excellence in the Classroom**

We worked with the 18 schools, both members of various multi-academy trusts and maintained schools. We invested in improving leadership and governance, maths, English, curriculum and SEND. We implemented the trauma informed schools' approach across the area with a number of staff graduating with a Diploma in Trauma Informed Schools, despite all the learning being online. We continue to work to improve the learning opportunities for those receiving pupil premium, and those who are undertaking transitions from one setting to another. The key challenges are lack of capacity, complexities of governance, and recruitment. Our work has had a focus on tested, national programmes which are evidence-based and delivered in West Somerset.

This summer we joined with the national Holiday Activities with Food programme and delivered a programme of 3,500 summer holiday activities across West Somerset. We tested the demand for childcare for low-income keyworkers. Our data shows there is underemployment of women in the area, and that our area has the highest proportion of key workers in the country alongside the lowest median wage.

Our project was able to establish places for families on Universal Credit, families who can access up to £35 a day for childcare. 1158 places were taken up across the summer holidays. If this were maximised, it would bring an additional income of £40,530 for 6 weeks' care into the community, as well as support parents back into work with subsidised childcare. Families can receive up to 85% of the childcare costs.

## **Transition to Adulthood**

This strand of the programme delivered a series of interventions and support with the aim of providing young people in West Somerset with a broader range of training and career options. This has included the development and rollout of short courses delivered by Somerset Skills & Learning and Hinkley Point C, delivery of a Duke of Edinburgh (DofE) Bronze Award course for NEET & vulnerable young people, online maths & English skills tutor, SomersetWorks HUBS in Minehead and Watchet, facilitating work experience for Year 10 and 12/13 students at West Somerset College, SomersetWorks staffing support, funding for Skill Up West Somerset, to name a few.

In Year 4 we were expected to undertake twinning work with other areas outside West Somerset. We elected to work with Mendip and have used funding to implement DofE, SomersetWorks HUBS in Glastonbury and Frome and additional support for Frome College. The Early Years project has also twinned with Schools in the Weymouth and Portland District

## **6 Commissioning & Performance**

### **6.1 Early Help**

The early help strategy (2021–2024) is in place and guide provided the basis for a systematic review of Early Help during 2021. The Institute of Public Care at Oxford Brookes University (IPC) were commissioned during the Autumn of 2021 to support the review current arrangements (including inclusion) and to make recommendations for improvements. Activities included:

- Review of practice models elsewhere.
- Consultation with over 100 leaders and professionals in 15 workshops.
- Meetings with parents' groups.
- Discussions with multi agency oversight group, Early Help Partnership Board and Somerset County Council's Children's Services Directorate Management Team

The review highlighted some key strengths within the Somerset Early Help system. These included a good quality shared strategy, some strong principles underpinning practice and evidence of good quality co-ordination for individual families in some areas. It also identified key areas which need further improvement including better early identification of families through information sharing, improvements to the early help assessment process, more consistent co-ordination (meaning fewer families would experience multiple referrals) and improvements to enable families to navigate the system themselves more easily.

The review resulted in the recommendation that partners should work together to drive forward improvement, informed by the current strategy and principles which are already in place and to develop:

- A digital platform which enabled families and professionals to find the right support at the right time. It will also provide better intelligence on what families are seeking to assist with future commissioning
- Improvements to and simplification of the assessment process and practice for early help services, including meetings to discuss family's needs
- Improvements to local co-ordination and key working arrangements to ensure professionals are aware of what is available locally and guided support is available to families in most need.

Workforce practice development ensuring staff from all sectors have access to relevant training and development opportunities.

The Early Help Board will take forward these recommendations and will ensure that governance and partnership arrangements will offer robust oversight of the implementation of improvements to ensure more consistency across the county.

A bid has been submitted to the DfE to the Family Hubs Transformation Fund. If this is successful it will enable plans to improve early help to be progressed

more quickly. The model requires local authorities to integrate services for families of all ages (0–19 and up to 25 with SEND). The Somerset proposal is to use family hubs as an organising concept to shape all services which impact on families, including housing and health services. The opportunities offered through both Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and the development of the Integrated Care System (ICS) are evident. Likewise, the potential to extend hubs to offer comprehensive, local, multidisciplinary 'all age hubs' for all vulnerable people and families is apparent.

The Holiday Activities and Food programme has been successfully implemented across the county with over 50,000 opportunities taken up by families during Easter, summer and at Christmas. The programme has been commissioned with Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership (SASP) who have helped around 6000 Somerset children to have a fun and active holiday with healthy food. During Easter's pandemic restrictions, online cookery activities were provided alongside food boxes, which saw families cooking together and particularly helped rurally isolated families who could not travel. One child said, For the first time ever, I have something to tell my friends about back at school. I am going to tell them "I made a den!"

## 6.2 **Securing enough homes for children and young people**

Securing local, good quality homes for children and young people in care or who are care leavers remains a challenge. This context coupled with more young people with complex needs, has resulted in fewer homes being available and rising costs.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) and the Care Review are looking at the national issues of insufficient good quality homes for children in care and the provider market for homes and independent fostering agencies. They both highlight rising costs, insufficient supply and no corresponding improvement in outcomes for children and young people. Both have made interim findings ([CMA interim report, 22/10/21](#), [Care review 'case for change', June 2021](#)), which identify the fact that current arrangements are not working for councils or children. Substantive recommendations for reform, regulation and commissioning practice are expected in the Spring of 2022.

Work to disrupt the children's homes market and increase the availability of good quality children's homes and fostering homes for Somerset's complex children and young people is well under way. SCC and Homes2Inspire (not for profit, part of the Shaw Trust) have begun a 10-year strategic partnership. The partnership signals a move away from transactional commissioning towards a more relational and shared way of commissioning homes and support.

This partnership will provide about 10 small children's homes across Somerset, around 20 specialist fostering households and therapeutic

education for the most vulnerable children and young people aged over 11. The ability to offer blended fostering and children's homes and to prioritise children and young people's learning and stability will be key. Council revenue (£70 million over 10 years) and capital (£3 million) investment will be supplemented by £1.02 million from a successful DfE capital bid.

Children and young people who are living in homes provided by external providers as at November (2021) are as follows:

• Independent foster placements	=	154
• Residential children's home	=	52
• Supported accommodation	=	44
• Parent and child fostering	=	8
• Education/Boarding	=	13
• Parent and child residential	=	9

Increases in all types of provision have been observed.

The existing step-forward programme which identifies children living in residential homes who are ready to move to a family has successfully supported 8 children and young people to make the move to a long-term fostering home.

The South West sufficiency project, which involves 14 local authorities across the South West, will produce a market position statement in April 2022. The statement will include recommendations to work more collaboratively as a region to address sufficiency issues.

The current contract to provide supported accommodation for young people with YMCA Dulverton Group and Brunel Group has been extended until the end of March 2024 to align with LGR developments. This year 11 innovation pilots for 16–25 year olds who are at risk of homelessness or needing supported accommodation have been developed. The pilots are testing out different housing support models and accommodation, wellbeing activities and targeted support around substance misuse. The 12-month pilots which started in November 2021 will be evaluated and the results will inform the wider supported accommodation procurement which will start in early 2023.

### 6.3 **Children's Social Care – adult focused support**

The council's investment in Family Solutions enables support to be provided to families, to enable them to parent and look after their children successfully. Taking an approach that helps parents to address underpinning problems (such as poor mental health, domestic abuse, substance misuse and isolation) results in more children living with their families.



Family Solutions is a suite of four graduated stages of intervention which address issues from early help – delivered by the organisation Safe Families, through children’s social work teams with integrated adult practitioners (Family Safeguarding), the Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) and the Pause project (delivered by the Nelson Trust).

Safe Families has been commissioned across Somerset to match volunteers with families in their community who are experiencing complex issues and need additional support (including overnight breaks). Nearly a third of referrals to Safe Families have been for children and young people with either a CP plan, CIN plan or were children looked after. Of these, over half (55%) no longer need intervention from statutory services and their cases are closed to children's social care. One parent reports: 'I'd be lost without the support from both the organisation and my volunteer. This service has helped me from going down a dark path that I've been down before, it has helped prevent me feeling so hopeless.'

Family Safeguarding integrates substance misuse, domestic abuse and mental health workers in children’s social care teams, to work alongside social workers to provide support and help to parents to address their underlying issues. These workers are commissioned from Turning Point (substance misuse interventions), The You Trust (domestic abuse support), and Open Mental Health (consortia of VCSE organisations, mental health support). The programme has delivered a decrease in the rate of children coming into care (from 49.9 per 10,000 in Nov 2020 to 48.5 in Nov 2021), and children on a child protection plan (from 26.4 per 10,000 in Nov 2020 to 23.4 in Nov 2021). Levels of job satisfaction in the team are high (93% said they are satisfied with the job they do) and vacancies have reduced significantly. One social worker stated: 'We had a parent alleging domestic abuse and we were able to immediately call in the domestic abuse worker first for advice, and then to contact the parent directly and arrange a safe place for the parent to go to. This immediate assistance is so different from our previous experience.'

FDAC seeks to offer a last chance to parents with significant substance misuse problems to address them and parent their children successfully. Under the supervision of the family courts, intensive support coupled with intensive oversight by a family judge can change things for parents and their children. This specialist team has adult focused support provided by The You Trust, Turning Point and Second Step. Although 60% of cases have not yet concluded, significant decreases have been seen in domestic abuse (from 86% experiencing domestic abuse at the start of the programme to 29% currently) and substance abuse (from 43% 'high use' at the start of the programme to 14% 'high use' currently). Feedback from families and judges has been very positive. One parent said that by speaking with the Judge directly she felt listened to – she said that she enjoyed being able to speak first.

The Pause project provides intensive support to women who have had two or more children removed into care to take a 'pause' from pregnancy and to take time to address the issues which prevented them from parenting safely and effectively. Commissioned from the Nelson Trust for a second 18-month programme, positive outcomes have been observed. Of the 20 women who have already completed the Pause project, none became pregnant during the programme, and all had improved their circumstances, including resuming good quality contact with their children, engaging in training, gaining confidence and resolving complex housing issues. Previously between them these women had had 70 children removed from their care. One parent reported: 'The times I have been able to meet some of the other women on Pause it has been nice as I am with people who have had similar experiences of having children removed. Even if we don't talk about it, I already feel comfortable knowing that we have that in common and they might be feeling the same as I do.'

#### 6.4 **Joint Commissioning and Integration**

A joint NHS and council commissioning plan is in place detailing the improvements that are required to make sure that children and families are offered more joined up care. The progress of this plan is reported to the SEND Improvement Board. A key activity is to understand need and how better use of resources can support families more effectively. To support this a new Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for Children (JSNA) will be developed during the early part of 2022.

Other activities include the development of the autism and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder pathways, an action plan to better integrate therapy services and delivery of an integrated community equipment and wheelchair services (joint tender). To further strengthen the plan and ensure the approach is truly integrated, key leaders from across the system have shared their financial information. This will further prioritise the work areas to ensure joint commissioning activity is directed towards activity that will have an impact.

In December 2020, the Somerset system was formally designated as an Integrated Care System (ICS). Children's commissioning plays an active part in the development of the ICS through participation in the leadership forum and other joint fora. These include a joint group to develop mental health and wellbeing services and women's and children's services. As a result, the Children and Young People's Mental Health Transformation Plan has been co-produced and a joint bid to NHS England to pilot a joint Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and Social Care team to respond to young people in crisis has been successful.

#### 6.5 **Partnership Business Unit**

Reporting against safeguarding and CYPP priorities from the Children and Young People's Plan 2019-2022 has continued on a quarterly basis, with the

Somerset Safeguarding Children's Partnership taking oversight of this plan, supported by the SSCP Business Unit, hosted by SCC.

Consultation on the new Children and Young People's Plan, to take effect on 1 April 2022, is at an advanced stage with significant input from children, young people and stakeholders. The emerging three priorities for the overall plan are:

- keeping children and young people safe
- supporting physical and emotional resilience
- enabling children and young people to learn and thrive.

More specific safeguarding priorities will include safe education, support for emotional, mental and physical health, neglect, and child exploitation.

Extensive work has been undertaken across the partnership to ensure that thresholds for services are applied correctly via a refresh of the Effective Support for Children and Families in Somerset guidance. Work continues to address neglect and an update and renaming of the neglect toolkit by the partnership is underway. Partners have restated the importance of pre-birth planning and developed a pre-birth workbook as a resource to support vulnerabilities in the ante-natal period. A successful bid to Research in Practice resulted in a needs assessment regarding child exploitation, and a new strategy, launched in December 2022, was based on this needs assessment. Further work is ongoing to provide a more up-to-date child exploitation screening tool for use by all partners.

Two SSCP Safeguarding Children weeks were held online in June and December, sharing key local and national safeguarding messages and reaching more than 200 members of the workforce during each week. These online events were designed both to promote engagement with the SSCP and to enable understanding and learning from local and national research, and they complemented the ongoing multi-agency safeguarding training offer.

## 6.6 **SEND – Strategic commissioning of Specialist School Places**

A regional approach to the commissioning of specialist independent school places is progressing. Aiming towards taking a more strategic approach to providers, the project has conducted extensive data analysis and produced a market position statement. The research highlighted the following:

- A high level of requests for specialist places, especially for Year 7
- An increase in requests for Reception places
- A rise in requests for assessment in the Early Years and Year 6.
- A lack of confidence of parents and some professionals that mainstream school or special school can meet the needs

Emerging priority areas for action are themed as follows:

- Assessment of need
- Market development
- Partnership
- Effective use of resources

The Somerset picture reflects the regional findings. At the start of 2018, SCC maintained 1,730 EHC plans. Around half of these (857) were for children and young people attending a specialist setting (maintained special school or academy, pupil referral unit, independent non-maintained special school, or specialist resource base/SEN unit). At the start of 2022, we expect to maintain over 4,000 EHC plans – an increase of 136% in four years. Around one third of these (1,290) will be for a child or young person attending a specialist setting.

To respond to these challenges, Somerset's deficit management plan will focus on three key priorities.

1. Reduce the subsidy from the high needs block of the dedicated schools grant (DSG) to individual schools for commissioning non-statutory SEN support provision
2. Focus resources and investment on effective early identification and intervention to enable children to access the right support at the right level at the right time in order to reduce demand on statutory/specialised services
3. Ensure sufficiency of special educational provision that is financially sustainable and enables children to access local inclusive provision wherever possible.

In addition, a new SEND Strategy will be developed during 2022 to reflect Somerset's priorities for improvement which will emerge from the JSNA and the regional findings.

## 7. **Support Services**

### 7.1 **Human Resources and Organisational Development (HR&OD)**

The HR&OD Service has continued to support all areas of Children's Services in a variety of ways, using and directing its expertise and specialisms where required. Its advice and support is well received by the service and there is a strong and collaborative relationship based on improving outcomes for CYP and their families and working to support our staff and teams to enable this.

This is happening through a number of routes tailored to service requirements as follows:

### **Children's Social Care**

The number of frontline social workers has remained steady across the year with around 82% of posts (data up to the end November 2021) permanently employed by SCC. Turnover for front line social workers has reduced across the year from around 19% to 13, and for all social work qualified roles has remained steady.

A successful mixture of recruitment activities has included:

- Advertisements aimed particularly at attracting newly qualified social workers to Somerset for their assisted and supported year in employment (ASYE)
- Student placement and 'grown your own schemes
- The particularly pleasing development of current staff to enable them to fill more senior roles as they became available, thus retaining these staff in Somerset.

Despite the above a number of vacancies still need to be filled. A range of new and innovative approaches is being employed. There has been a significant increase in the number of staff on maternity leave (who will return in the future) whose posts need to be backfilled on a temporary basis. The recruitment and engagement officer has advised and assisted managers on adverts, campaigns and images. Applications have been reviewed daily and passed to relevant managers to ensure pace. Interviewing ahead of closing date guidance, keeping warm calls and on boarding, induction (welcome calls to all new starters at around week 3) and retention calls prior to anyone leaving have all been put in place. Support has been given to the children's transformation programme including working with external partners on new projects such as Family Safeguarding and FDAC, with colleagues in the fostering service after their restructure and on the social workers in schools project as well as linking with Reed re temporary labour, and our recruitment events management.

HR&OD officers set up and attended two events over the Autumn of 2021 alongside colleagues from children's services – the Hampshire County Council Social Work in the South West 1-day event and the Community Care Live 2-day event in London which, as hosts included running the Childrens seminar on day 1 which was based around our Family Solutions Somerset work.

HR&OD is always looking to improve and use innovative approaches to try new things. SCC was previously signed up to a full package of support via Community Care but found it was not possible to demonstrate the return on investment. Instead, last year, SCC invested in the Indeed platform and package and has gained Featured Employer Status including sponsoring

advertises where necessary to increase visibility which has led to some success. SCC's Indeed rating has increased from 3.2 to 3.6 (out of 5) this year with one respondent saying 'I have worked for SCC for 6 years and in that time, they have really invested in my personal development, as a result I started as a newly qualified worker and am now part of the management team. I have really felt part of the SCC journey.'

SCC's Glassdoor ratings have increased from 3.6 to 4.3 with 91% of staff who have completed ratings saying that they would recommend SCC as an employer to a friend and 99% approving of Pat as our CEO.

Significant work has been undertaken on our employer brand and new SCC recruitment website as well as multimedia sites and advertising on our SCC Careers pages – Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Indeed and Twitter, these are separate from the main SCC corporate site as they just cover culture and recruitment content.

Feedback from managers and staff on previous work on recruiting social workers from overseas has informed a project that is just starting with a new provider who has a successful track record and has worked with other LAs. This provider undertakes a 3-step recruitment process which includes a written test before candidates are put forward to managers in Somerset to interview. The company also provides support with relocation and, once the recruits are in the UK, a full training package on the differences between practice in Southern Africa and in the UK. Consultant social workers are involved in designing peer support to this group when they arrive in the Spring of 2022. Interviews take place in Jan 2022, with the hope of recruiting at least 10 as our first cohort.

The already hard to fill role of social worker has become even harder to fill this year. In addition to all the work outlined above there has been a focus on SCC's learning and development (L&D) offer and pipeline, supportive culture and creativity to support staff to enable them to fulfil their roles and maintain excellent practice.

Considerable work from the Children's L&D team (currently managed by the HR Organisational Development Manager) has utilised a range of successful 'grow your own' and development schemes, working with varying providers to ensure there are locally qualified social workers to bring into the authority. Last year, this involved a number of Children's teams supporting placements for 65 students with the aim of persuading them to stay in Somerset once they have qualified. Existing staff have continued to be supported to upskill via apprenticeships. A number of Children's Services staff have accessed the funded qualifications, most notably third cohort of social work degree apprentice s has begun, paired with the University of Gloucestershire.

The first cohort of the award-winning programme that SCC set up in

partnership with Yeovil College qualify in 2022. It is currently predicted that 10 of those students will join SCC to start their ASYE year. There are currently 26 staff undertaking their ASYE year.

SCC is leading the Step Up to Social Work programme in the South West, supporting 48 University of the West of England social work students to qualify as social workers over the 14-month programme. Nine of the students will undertake their placements at SCC and it is hoped they will take up roles within Children's Services in Spring 2023. SCC continues to support Frontline (4 students) as well as the social work degree apprenticeship route mentioned above (15 existing Children's Services staff completing the qualification), and those directly from higher education institutions.

External recruitment for newly qualified social workers continues.

The team has commissioned and run 183 courses for existing staff covering 1699 attendees.

In addition to more business as usual areas of advice, support and training, this year HR&OD has also:

- Worked with the service to create and launch a 7-point retention plan for frontline staff covering a range of areas such as development, quality of practice, getting teams together and pay elements.
- Provided significant input from the HR Advisory Service on a restructure within fostering.
- Supported good employee relations with trade unions via half termly JCC meetings chaired by the Deputy Director for Children's Services.
- Recruited additional family intervention workers and senior social work assistants to ensure support to qualified roles and further enhance routes into social work supported by apprenticeships/other qualifications.
  - Supported a range of initiatives around residential units on performance, structures and recruitment
  - Corporate work around working well initiatives such as monthly challenges, Display Screen Equipment seminars, getting equipment out to staff to ensure working safely at home
  - Health and safety risk assessments and keeping staff in work and in offices on rota systems to comply with government Covid legislation but to ensure ongoing collaboration to reduce risk to CYP and families.
- Worked with the CSC teams, including engaging with staff and under-represented groups to create a new workforce strategy covering to the end of 2024.

### **Inclusion Services**

This year considerable input from HR&OD colleagues has gone into Inclusion,

specifically as a result of the Ofsted inspection and the written statement of action. The HR Business Partner leads one of the 9 system-wide improvement priority areas focusing on leadership and culture. This has involved 2-weekly delivery group calls, managing large system wide programmes of work, presenting progress on Ofsted and DfE monitoring calls and taking part in the monthly service quality and performance calls reporting back on all areas of HR&OD. The HR Advisory Service was particularly involved in advising and supporting on a TUPE transfer out of staff in 2021.

### **Wider Children's Services**

HR&OD teams have also supported the wider range of Children's Services such as Education and Partnerships, (including SSE) and Commissioning with professional advice and guidance on areas such as restructures, recruitment, TUPE, terms and conditions, wellbeing, pay, sickness absence, performance management, health and safety including risk assessments, equalities impact assessments, learning and development and apprenticeships.

## **7.2 Finance**

The finance team continues to work closely with budgets holders in improving financial management information, monitoring, forecasting, and reporting. The informative monthly budget monitoring report and monthly metrics report bring service activity and performance data together with financial data, focusing attention on the cause of financial pressures and the impact of Covid, greater complexity of need and strategic and operational decision-making. Both reports highlight and monitor against management action and risk to strengthen good financial management in a challenging financial environment.

The finance team continues, as it did last year, responding to Covid by understanding and quantifying its financial impact in the short and medium term and in securing government funding.

The focus for finance this year has also been on providing financial advice and expertise in support of the Children's Transformation Programme.

Finance has been working closely with the SEND Improvement team around joint commissioning and the development of a joint commissioning finance report, providing transparency, a shared understanding of current commitments and opportunities, while developing stronger partnership working. The finance team has also provided support and challenge in relation to the written statement of action business cases, ensuring they are robust and achieve value for money.

Finance have been working with the service on Education Partnerships and Early Help projects, specifically in relation to the Crewkerne and Ilminster reorganisation and the Family Hub transformation.



The Finance team continues to support the Building Local Capacity and Sufficiency project, providing revenue and capital advice and expertise on the 10-year partnership with Homes2Inspire.

And finally, finance has worked alongside the Assistant Director for Inclusion in the development of the DSG deficit management plan with significant improvement in the financial and performance information available to inform the DMP and ensure that it is robust, realistic and achieves a sustainable financial position going forwards.