

Report of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Advisory Board

Chair: Cllr Leigh Redman

Division and Local Member: All

Lead Officer: Neil Milne – Governance Specialist

Author: Fiona Abbott – Senior Democratic Services Officer

Contact Details: 01823 357337 fabbott@somerset.gov.uk

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 from November 2021 to January 2022 and provides information on the items to be considered at the meeting on 28 February 2022 and the informal workshop on 6 April 2022.
- 1.2** We continue 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 (with 1 vacancy) and has up to seven co-opted members appointed.

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 1 December 2021

The main points from the meeting were: -

Progress update on the Written Statement of Action (WSOA) – the Council's Assistant Director Inclusion, Dr Rob Hart provided an update on the Written Statement of Action (WSOA). We received the following documents with the agenda papers for the meeting: -

- Written Statement of Action Progress Report, shared with DfE (Department for Education) and NHSE advisors in September 2021;
- Some short summary slides showing the most recent progress update to the SEND Improvement Board in November 2021; and
- The original Written Statement of Action (for context/ background)

Dr Hart covered the following in the presentation – some background to the WSoA ('what trying to achieve'); how the WSoA is being implemented and monitoring; the difference being made, successes and impact; the risks and challenges; and priorities for the next 12 months.

The Committee asked detailed questions and made a number of comments, which were responded to at the meeting, covering – preparations being made and timeline for the reinspection; resourcing to deliver the WSoA; impact of covid on staff capacity; engagement with families; links / relationship of SEND Strategy for 2023 onwards, to the developing Education Strategy; information sharing. Dr Hart said that by December 2022, he is confident will have delivered WSoA and embedded the improvement need to do.

On behalf of the Committee, I thanked Dr Hart for the detailed presentation and asked that the WSoA be brought back to a future meeting to provide information in more depth on the following – the items identified in 'red' on the progress overview (listening to Children and young people and their families; consistency of practice); clarity on resourcing point; data and digital inclusion; explanation / clarity on the relationship with the developing Education Strategy. My Vice Chair and I have discussed with officers the best way forward for this.

Analysis to support development of an Education Strategy for Somerset - we

then received a detailed presentation from the Council's Assistant Director Education, Partnerships and Skills, Ms Amelia Walker, on the development of an Education Strategy for Somerset. This followed on from the presentation given at the October 2021 meeting on changes to the education governance arrangements in Somerset. The Cabinet member, Councillor Frances Nicholson introduced the item and said that the new Schools Forum had held its first meeting recently and it felt positive and effective and that the new Strategy Board would hold its first formal meeting shortly.

In the presentation, Ms Walker outlined the complex education landscape and the local authority role in education. In conclusion she explained that there are a number of areas under development which might feed into a new *system* Strategy, including - the findings from Inclusion Inquiry; a new project working with LA (Local Authorities) Maintained schools (with option to extend to academies and trusts in future) looking at opportunities to get better value for money so we can invest; the Oxford Brookes's project on Early Help; the work underway to re-imagine how SEND services are delivered; expanding opportunities for cross-border working on curriculum and subjects, building on West Somerset Opportunity Area project.

Ms Walker said that these can be reported back to this Committee as they develop over the course of the coming year. Indeed, the findings from the Inclusion Inquiry is scheduled for the February meeting of the Committee.

The Committee asked detailed questions about the development of the Strategy and the partnership approach needed to take this forward. On behalf of the Committee, I thanked Ms Walker for the detailed presentation, recognising that it is still early in the process and the Strategy Board is yet to meet. The Committee would welcome feedback on the development of the Strategy, and this has been added to our outcome tracker.

Supporting eco-friendly schools – we then considered a report and received a PowerPoint presentation from the Council's Head of Support Services for Education, Mr Ian Rowswell on work undertaken on supporting eco-friendly schools [Eco-Friendly Schools | Support Services for Education](#)

Mr Rowswell advised that the SSE (Support Services for Education) website was launched recently and provides useful information on how schools can undertake activities and link into the eco schools programme for example. Mr Rowswell provided some detail of support around school meal provision. He also outlined the next steps, as follows - continue to promote the website and for further online events for schools; adding further information and links to new projects and resources that could support schools; work closely with the School Improvement Team to help evaluate resources and identify good curriculum links and resources; SCC (Somerset County Council) successful bid to the Forestry Commission's Local Authorities Treescape Fund should result in planting 320 trees across Somerset; Closer working with stakeholders and in particular with District Council colleagues; and consider how to address risks

around capacity.

In response to comments made, Mr Rowswell said that the website will provide signposting to other funding opportunities and have focussed attention on additional support which schools can access. He also commented that are working closely with the Somerset Waste Partnership as well.

On behalf of the Committee, I thanked Mr Rowswell for the detailed presentation, and it was agreed that an information sheet would be circulated to all members (and this has now been done).

Information items circulated to the Scrutiny Committee since the last meeting – the Committee noted the following information item which had been circulated recently – CAMHS service delivery update – Report considered by the [Somerset Health & Wellbeing Board at the meeting on Monday 22 November 2021](#)

2.3 Meeting on Tuesday 25 January 2022

The main points from the advisory board meeting were: -

Partnership Children & Young People's Plan 2022 – 2025 – the Council's Deputy Director Children's Services outlined how the financial resources that are available to Children Services are used in relation to both Children Services planning and how that links into the Somerset Children & Young People's Plan (CYPP) 2022 – 2025. Members then received a detailed presentation on the draft Somerset partnership CYPP and the 3 agreed priorities - keeping children and young people safe (priority 1); supporting physical and emotional health and resilience (priority 2); enabling young people to learn and thrive (priority 3).

I thanked officers for the detailed presentation and for the excellent graphics and the policy on a page information, which provides links to all activity going on across partnership; that it is important to recognise the voice of child through this and thanked them for the work on engagement with children and young people; asked officers to consider the points and comments made around transitions, education, early years, the parents voice, and districts involvement in the future unitary work.

Children's Services Business Plan and resourcing through the Medium-Term Financial Plan for 2022 – 2023 – we then considered the budget report which summarised the key areas of specific interest within the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) to the scrutiny committee for Children and Families. The advisory board was invited to (a) consider the proposed budget for 2022/23 for Children's and Family Services budgets; and (b) review / comment on specific proposals for changes from previous years, to offer assurance to Cabinet and/or identify any matters for consideration that would like to highlight to the Cabinet.

The advisory board additionally received a PowerPoint presentation which

provided the context and the links and inter relationship with the Children's Services Business Plan and the Children's Services MTFP 2022/23.

I thanked officers for the presentation and that Members still have the opportunity to feed into the budget and MTFP process. The advisory board noted the MTFP for Children and Families Services 2022 – 2023 and the Children's Services Plan and requested additional information / clarification on some matters, including, for example, how some of the investments and savings is presented in the papers and early years funding. The advisory board recognised / had acceptance of the uncertainty in the budget due to unknowns around the long-term effects and impact of Covid.

Task and Finish Group – update – I then provided a brief update on the work of the Task and Finish Group on the 'Continuity of Children's Services through Local Government Reorganisation.' A copy of the full statement is attached at **Appendix 1**.

The members of the Task and Finish Group were - myself, as Chair, my Vice Chair, Cllr Rod Williams, Cllr Bill Revans and Ms E Tipper (a co-opted member on the Committee).

Information items circulated to the Scrutiny Committee since the last meeting – the Committee noted the following information item which had been circulated recently - Family Safeguarding in Somerset – interim evaluation presentation.

2.4 28 February 2022

At this meeting we will be discussing the following areas: -

- (a) School Exclusions – update on Task and Finish Group;
- (b) Inclusion Inquiry (both to include engagement of vulnerable learners in education);
- (c) Homes for Children;
- (d) Items for information, including update on 'Trauma Informed Somerset'.

2.5 Joint Informal meeting with Adults and Health Scrutiny Committee

Our meeting scheduled for 4 April has now been postponed and this allows Committee members to join with the Adults and Health Scrutiny Committee at a joint informal workshop on 6 April. The informal meeting will consider (a) feedback from transition arrangements – preparing for adulthood; (b) mental health support in the community / response time.

2.6 Suggestions for the Future

We have updated our work plan and suggested items to be taken forward in the

next Municipal Year. I am sure that the new Committee will want to continue focussing on the WSoA, preventative agenda and the CYPP 2022 – 2025 and continue to refine how information can be best shared, to support members ability to participate and grow.

The Committee and I 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.

This may be my last report under this current Council, I still believe a dedicated Service/Scrutiny link officer would help ensure Committee, Cabinet members and Service leaders are driving in the same direction and have aligned agendas, the more the service embraces Scrutiny the better service we can provide to the young people and families we serve.

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

5.1 **Appendix 1** – Statement regarding the Task and Finish Group

5.2 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.

APPENDIX 1

Statement - Task and Finish Group – Continuity of Children’s’ Services through Local Government Reorganisation

The Task and Finish Group (Continuity of Children’s Services through Local Government Reorganisation in Somerset) met on Tuesday 11 January 2022 to consider the current progress made and to think about the next steps. The Task & Finish Group members reflected on the significant amount of work this review would involve and the impending Council elections. The elections and the proximity of the pre-election notice period (beginning on 21 March) meant there were now only 2 scheduled meetings of the Committee before the pre-election notice period begins.

The group also acknowledged the officer led work already underway in the LGR process.

After careful consideration, the Task and Finish Group members agreed that it would be very difficult for them to complete and conclude the evidence gathering aspect of the review, then interpret that information in a timely manner and make appropriate recommendations, as such they strongly believed the review would benefit from a robust process and specific input from children’s services. The Task and Finish Group felt that, in their opinion as members of this group and Children and Families Scrutiny Committee, that it would be more advantageous to the young people and families for the newly formed joint scrutiny committee, to take up and include this Task and Finish review into the transition work for children’s services, in their forward programme of business.

The members of the group thanked officers and members that went out of their way to help the review.