

## **Annual Report of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Scrutiny Committee**

Chair: Cllr Leigh Redman

Division and Local Member: All

Lead Officer: Neil Milne – Governance Specialist

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### **1. Summary**

- 1.1** The Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee is required by the Constitution to provide Full Council with a summary progress report and outcomes of scrutiny. This is our final annual report and covers our meetings from July 2021 to the end of the Municipal Year.
- 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 on it and has up to seven co-opted members appointed, as follows - 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 has helped to guide our future work.

At each meeting we review how we monitor how our suggested outcomes and/or recommended actions have been progressed so we can understand the impact of our work and learn how we can 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 Informal meeting on 9 June 2021 and meeting on 7 July 2021**

The items considered at the informal meeting held in June were reported to Council in July 2021 and covered the following - Homes for children in Somerset; Education performance data.

The items considered at the meeting held in July were reported to Council in July 2021 and covered the following: - 6 months on - learning from the voice of children & young people in the later stages of the pandemic; School Exclusions; SCC Business Plan 2021 – 2023; Unitary Transition Task and Finish Group; information item – briefing paper on children’s oral health.

## **2.3 Meetings on 9 September 2021, 4 October 2021 and 8 November 2021**

The items considered at the meeting held in September were reported to Council in November 2021 and covered the following: - SCC response to Afghan refugee position; Social Care – the experience of younger children in care; update on the task and finish group; information item – briefing paper on the HMIP inspection.

The items considered at the meeting held in October 2021 were reported to Council in November 2021 and covered the following: - Changes to education governance arrangements; ECHP – deep dive.

The items considered at the meeting held in November were reported to Council in November 2021 and covered the following: - Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews; West Somerset Opportunity Area; Trauma Informed Approach workshop; information item – Tribunal summary report.

## **2.4 Meeting on 1 December 2021 and Advisory Board meeting on 25 January 2022**

The items considered at the meeting held in December were reported to Council in February 2022 and covered the following: - Progress update on the Written Statement of Action; Analysis to support development of an Education Strategy for Somerset; Supporting eco-friendly schools; information item – CAMHS service delivery update.

The items considered at the Advisory Board meeting held in January 2022 were reported to Council in February 2022 and covered the following: - Partnership Children & Young People's Plan 2022 – 2025; Children's Services Business Plan and resourcing through the Medium-Term Financial Plan for 2022 – 2023; Task and Finish Group – update; information item – Family safeguarding in Somerset interim evaluation presentation.

## **2.5 Advisory Board meeting on 28 February 2022**

The main points from the advisory board meeting were: -

**Inclusion Inquiry** – the Council's Assistant Director Inclusion, Dr Rob Hart and Mr Brian Walton, Head Teacher Brookside Academy provided a comprehensive update on the Inclusion Inquiry which is being led by school leaders as part of the Written Statement of Action and developing an evidence-based understanding of what good inclusive practice looks like and suggestions for improvement. Mr Walton outlined the key recommendations from the inquiry and the next steps, to ensure the 'recommendations become reality'.

I was particularly pleased to hear about the involvement of young people in the inquiry work. I also asked to visit Brookside Academy to see the work being done there.

**Inclusion and engagement in education** – linked to the above item, we then had a presentation from the Council's Assistant Director, Inclusion, Dr Rob Hart, Mr Phil Curd, Strategic Manager, Access & Additional Learning Needs and Ms Emily Walters, Head Virtual School & Learning Support. on inclusion and engagement in education. This covered - school attendance, exclusions and suspensions and elective home education, and the role of the Inclusion Partnership Boards; details on key priorities of supporting inclusion and ensuring a consistent and inclusive offer for all children and young people; information on supporting the most vulnerable and role of the Virtual School which can offer support to schools and settings across a broad range of needs.

We had a good discussion and asked that the following matters be followed up – how best to share best practice and being open and transparent (data offer), signposting, how bring everyone together.

**Homes for children** – we then had an update from the Council's Assistant Director Commissioning & Performance, Ms Helen Price on the homes for children, high needs fostering and therapeutic education, which followed on from the presentation to members in June 2021.

The Council has now appointed Homes 2 Inspire, Fostering2Inspire and Shaw Education Trust (all part of the Shaw Trust) as the strategic partner to deliver the service and have almost secured home one and are looking for home two. The Council has also been successful in its bid to the DfE for additional capital

funding (£1.026m). The Institute of Public Care (Oxford Brooks) are conducting an evaluation, including what worked well and lessons to be learnt.

We agreed that a 6-month update would be added to the Committee work programme.

**Information item** - we were advised that this update on Trauma informed Somerset would be circulated following the meeting.

**AOB** –as this was the last Committee meeting of the 5-year period I asked to place on record my thanks to Committee members, Cabinet members and support officers. I thanked my Vice Chair, Cllr Rod Williams for his help and support and that it had been an honour to be Chair of the Committee.

I also said that it had been disappointing that more Committee members and senior leaders had not attended the meeting, which was echoed by other Committee members.

## **2.6 Joint Informal meeting with Adults and Health Scrutiny Committee**

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

Despite this being on our work plan for many months, we agreed to cancel the workshop as there appeared to be little appetite for our joint meeting to go ahead. We were disappointed by this as this had been scheduled in the work programme for many months and concerns about this were raised late in the day. We had agreed that this would have been an appropriate end to the quinquennium given that it was the current scrutiny members who asked for the joint workshop to cover the many issues that cross over both our committees, whilst recognising the work of officers. Our Children and Families Scrutiny members had already agreed to cancel one of our scheduled meetings to enable this workshop to happen - an example of when good communication could have prevented frustration.

## **3 Meetings Overview 2021 – 2022**

We have again considered a broad number of issues at our meetings during the course of the Municipal Year, and these have included: -

- Homes for children
- Education performance data
- Development of the Partnership Children & Young People's Plan 2022 - 2025
- Update on our Task and Finish group on School Exclusions
- SCC business plan

- Task and Finish Group on the continuity of Children's Services through LGR
- SCC response to Afghan refugee position
- Experience of younger children in care
- Changes to education governance arrangements in Somerset; development of education strategy for Somerset
- Education, Health and Care – assessments and plans
- Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership
- West Somerset Opportunity Area
- Update on the Written Statement of Action
- Supporting Eco- friendly schools
- Children's Services Business Plan and resourcing through MTFP
- Inclusion Inquiry and inclusion and engagement in education
- Several items for information

#### **4. 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. Before the last Ofsted inspection there was a marked improvement regarding engagement for Officers in the Directorate but since that time there has been a drop off in the support the Committee has received. This can be demonstrated most clearly when we had no dedicated officer support for our Task & Finish review (despite it being a suggestion originally from the DCS).

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 to better focus our work. The more the service embraces the Scrutiny function and capability this will help to ensure a better service is provided to the young people and families we serve.

So it leaves me to thank all who have worked to make this Committee function, special shout out to Fiona Abbott, Neil Milne and Jamie Jackson, extra special

shout to our co-opted members who have in some cases proved why they are here with their extensive knowledge.

I hope the new chair of this Committee and new members use the first period of Council to learn and understand the importance of good scrutiny, we need to ensure the voice of the child is in every action we take as a Council, regardless of service.

## **5. 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.

## **6. 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.

## **7. Background Papers**

Further information about the Committee including dates of meetings and agendas and reports from previous meetings, are available via the Council's website - [www.somerset.gov.uk/agendasandpapers](http://www.somerset.gov.uk/agendasandpapers)

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