

– 23 November 2022

Report of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Scrutiny Committee

Chair: Cllr Leigh Redman

Division and Local Member: All

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1. Summary

- 1.1** The Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee is required by the Constitution to provide Full Council with a summary progress report and outcomes of scrutiny. This report covers the work of the Scrutiny Committee from the start of this Municipal Year to November 2022.
- 1.2** The Committee focusses on the outcomes from the recent Ofsted Inspection of Children’s Services and the Children and Young Peoples Plan (CYPP) which has the following three 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). We have now arranged our work plan to cover the following broad areas –
- universal education
 - SEND and Inclusion
 - social care and commissioning
 - cross-cutting items
 - and a number of training items and workshop items.
- 1.3** Members of the Council are reminded that:
- all Members have been invited to attend meetings of the Scrutiny Committees and to contribute freely on any agenda item.
 - any Member can 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 13 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. We are in the process of appointing a new church representative and are seeking to fill the two parent governor vacancies.

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 Executive Members after discussion and debate.

2.2 Meeting held 20 June 2022

Ahead of the meeting, Committee members had a training session from key lead officers covering the work of the Committee and an overview of scrutiny at the Council. This also help shape the work plan for the Committee.

The main points from the meeting were: -

Family Safeguarding – overview – the Committee received a PowerPoint presentation from the Council’s Strategic Commissioner, in Children’s Services Louise Palmer and the Council’s Head of Service for Assessment and Safeguarding in Children’s Social Care, Paul Shawcross who provided an implementation update on Family Safeguarding in Somerset.

The Committee noted the successes and evaluation undertaken by York Consulting which is due in the next month, the positive interim report headlines and issues for consideration - impact of the pandemic on the implementation; the ‘workbook’; increasing complexity of cases. Following the meeting information on Somerset’s statistical neighbours was circulated.

School Place Planning – the Committee then received a PowerPoint presentation from the Council’s Assistant Director, Education Partnerships and Skills, Amelia Walker, the Assistant Director Inclusion, Dr Rob Hart and the Strategic Manager, Phil Curd who provided an overview of school and early years places.

The Committee noted the pupil numbers, key trends, challenges and pressures on school places and the action being taken and the growth of specialist places and the significant rise in the number of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), the challenges and response.

From 2018 the local authority has delivered 10 significant special school and resource base projects providing 306 additional places at a cost of £49.25m. A £4.75m expansion project is underway at Sky Academy, providing another 40 places in time for September 2022. There is also a £2m capital approval available to deliver a specialist hub for up to 40 children in West Somerset and officers are working with the DfE to deliver a new special free school in South Somerset for 120 children. In addition, officers are working with mainstream secondary schools to deliver a number of 'Enhanced Learning Provisions' which will those schools to support children's needs and reduce demand for places in special schools. Another project will deliver a Therapeutic Education provision for a small number of children - the Council's High Needs Capital Allocation will underpin this.

The Committee additionally received an overview of early years provision and the key challenges and risks, immediate pressures in terms of workforce, sustainability and viability and how this is being tackled and also the issue of school transport.

The Committee had a broad discussion on the issues highlighted, covering – school capacity and pupil place planning, the take up of places in early years, special educational needs and disability numbers, the new Education White Paper which the Committee will look at in the future, clarification that there are no plans to close schools and the opportunities available for people to become school governors.

2.3 Meeting held on 25 July 2022

The main points from the meeting were: -

Education and Inclusion Services Redesign – the Committee received a PowerPoint presentation from the Council's Assistant Director, Inclusion Dr Rob Hart, who presented the proposals for the Education and Inclusion Services redesign.

Dr Hart covered the following in the presentation – context / aims of the service redesign and the need for systemic change; outlined the current structure and issues and challenges; detailed proposals within an area-based structure, with clearer accountability structure; what kind of service will become; strengthening preventative capacity; outlined the consultation process and proposed timeline with implementation from beginning of 2023.

The Committee had a broad discussion on the proposals, covering – how will know the changes lead to the outcomes wanted (what will 'success' look like); where the proposals sit in terms of national guidance and best practice; where

and how early years 'fit' in the proposals; details on the Support Services for Education (SSE), management and commercial development.

It was agreed that I and my Vice Chair, Cllr Oliver Patrick, relevant officers and the Lead Member for Children and Families would discuss best route for the Scrutiny Committee to consider the proposals.

Information item – the Committee noted the following item for information:-

(a) [Somerset Children and Young People's Plan 2022 – 2024](#) approved at the Full Council meeting held on 20 July 2022

2.4 Meeting held on 5 September 2022

The main points from the meeting were: -

2022 Key Stage assessment results for Somerset – the Committee received a PowerPoint presentation from the Council's Assistant Director, Education Partnerships and Skills, Amelia Walker who provided a data and standards update, including the early indications from the 2022 Key Stage assessment results for Somerset and the areas of focus.

Testing generates vast quantities of data and therefore accurate and reliable results to pupil level will not be in the public domain until January 2023. The national data is released in October. Following the meeting Ms Walker circulated the presentation given to the informal meeting in 2021, which provided an introduction to education data and performance. The Committee had a broad discussion on the issues raised in the presentation.

Academisation - moving towards 2030 – the Committee then received a PowerPoint presentation from the Council's Assistant Director, Education Partnerships and Skills, Amelia Walker which provided an update on academisation in Somerset, following the publication of the Government Schools White Paper 'Opportunity for All' in March 2022. This set out the intention to: -

- See all schools in 'strong trusts' by 2030
- Achieve greater clarity about the respective roles for the Department for Education, Local Authorities, Ofsted, Multi-academy trusts and the Schools Adjudicator
- Create 'Education Investment Areas' where standards are lower (following the end of Opportunity Areas)
- Replace Regional Schools Commissioner offices with Regional Teams
- Raise standards in existing trusts

Ms Walker highlighted the implications and work being undertaken in Somerset – this includes discussions with schools about the traded offer ('the Patchwork'). A group of secondary schools has put together a partnership with feeder primary schools to collaborate on school improvement ('Somerset Partnership') - neither

is a replacement for academisation. The traded offer is a new traded offer and it is intended to mirror how trusts support schools more closely, but an LA cannot be a trust. The Partnership is similar to existing groups in the county known as 'Community Learning Partnerships'.

The Committee had a broad discussion, including – the 'priority education investment area' and what it may mean for West Somerset; local authority multi academy trusts; deficit in the local authority school estate; the 'democratic deficit' and performance of schools in the reformed system. It was agreed that a progress update be given to the Committee in 6 months.

Update on budgetary pressures in Children's Services - the Committee received a PowerPoint presentation from the Council's Deputy Director of Children's Services, Claire Winter who provided an update on the budgetary pressures in Children's Services.

As a background to the item, the link to the revenue budget monitoring report had been shared with the Committee. This report had been considered at the Executive meeting on 17 August 2022 and concerns the 2022/23 revenue budget monitoring report – month 3 – end June 2022, and in particular the information relating to Children's Services.

The key areas of pressure are external placements for children in care and secondly education transport – home to school and SEND transport and Ms Winter outlined the key performance cost drivers and actions / activity to address pressures. It was confirmed that the education transport strategy will be considered at the Place Scrutiny Committee on 6 September 2022 and will be brought to this Committee in October 2022.

The following information was circulated following the meeting (a) 'Staying Put' policy; (b) numbers in residential care data for 21/22 and how we sit with statistical neighbours.

The Committee also congratulated the department for winning the 2022 LGC award for the fostering campaign.

It was agreed that Children's Services budget monitoring will be discussed at the next meeting. I also highlighted that at some point the Committee may consider setting up a task and finish group looking at external care placements, in conjunction with Corporate Parenting Board.

Information items – the Committee noted the following items for information: -

- (a) Task and Finish Group review of School Exclusions (23 September 2020)
- (b) Task Group review of Elective Home Education (June 2015) and update report to [Committee March 2021](#)

2.5 Meeting held on 3 October 2022

The main points from the meeting were: -

Ofsted Inspection Result - Children's Social Care Services – update - the Committee received a verbal update from the Council's Deputy Director Children's Services, Claire Winter on the Inspection of Somerset local authority children's services. The Inspection of the Council's Children's Social Care services in July 2022 rated the services Good across the board and the inspection report was published on 21 September 2022. The report can be found on the following link – [Inspection of Somerset local authority children's services](#)

Members of the Committee congratulated the team and all those involved on this achievement. Ms Winter highlighted the 2 recommendations in the report – namely placement sufficiency (which is also a national issue) and the take-up of return to home interviews and that this will be the main areas of focus in the action plan work. It was noted that the Committee will have the opportunity to have a more detailed discussion at its next meeting.

Children's Services Budget Monitoring Report - the item was introduced by the Council's Assistant Director Inclusion, Dr Rob Hart who referred to the most recent budget monitoring report and focussing on the current projected adverse variance and the major cost pressures across Home to School and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) transport.

The Committee: -

- (a) Noted the proposed actions to address the budget trajectory, including the Children's Transformation Programme, which focuses effort on key areas of demand / pressures
- (b) Noted that the Executive has asked the Committee to review the 2022/23 budget monitoring position for its services and agreed that the Chair and Vice Chair will discuss further establishing a Task & Finish Group to look at the 'top spends', transport and external placements.

Home to School Transport – the Committee then received a PowerPoint presentation from the Council's Strategic Manager, Access & Additional Learning Needs Phil Curd and Service Manager Transporting Somerset John Perrett, who provided an overview of the Council's school transport duties, demand, growth of specialist places, transport organisation, costs, the significant challenges in the provision of home to school transport across Somerset and the development of a new School Travel Cost Management Strategy. It was noted that a presentation had also been given at the Place Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 6 September 2022.

It was agreed: -

- (a) to note the update and current position and proposed next steps and development
- (b) to add school transport to the Committee's work plan for refreshed Council policy (to reflect statutory guidance and possible discretionary changes)
- (c) the Chair and Vice Chair to discuss further a possible Task and Finish Group for SEND transport, to include provision for pre and post school club attendance, for example.

SEND Draft Strategy and Development – the item was introduced by the Council's Assistant Director Inclusion Dr Rob Hart, and Strategic Manager, Commissioning, Vikki Hearn who outlined the on-going work in developing the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Strategy 2023-26.

The strategy will set the priorities for SEND improvement following on from the Written Statement of Action (WSOA) period, due to be completed by the end of December 2022. The priorities are evidence based and have been developed through extensive engagement, from the findings of the SEND JSNA, and taking into consideration the vast amount of research commissioned to better understand the needs of the SEND system. The Committee then received a PowerPoint presentation from Ruth Hobbs, highlighting the key messages from the recent Somerset's SEND Annual Survey.

The Committee:

- (a) Noted the following emerging SEND Strategy Themes which will be underpinned by a number of mission statements, outlining how these will be delivered, for consultation.
 1. Listen, Hear and Respond - Children and young people with SEND and their families will be heard and feel they have choice and control about their lives. Not for me, with me.
 2. Working Together and Coordinated - We are working together as a co-ordinated system and at the case level, around the family.
 3. Getting Help as Early as Possible - Children, young people and their families are able to access the right support at the right time.
 4. Access to the right information, support and provision - Children, young people and their families telling us: "I understand the support and provision that is available to me, and I can access it, if I need it."
 5. Preparing for the future - Children and young people have the right skills and options, according to their individual needs, to take control of their future and achieve the ambitions important to them.
- (b) Asked to see the final report from the Annual Survey when it is available.
- (c) Asked that the consultation draft of the SEND Strategy be shared with the Committee
- (d) That the SEND Strategy be brought back to the Committee after the consultation and engagement has concluded.

Information items – the Committee noted that the detailed response which had been sent to the Vice Chair regarding what's in place to address the impact of COVID on pupil / staff absences and school closures, had been shared with all members of the Committee.

2.6 Meeting on 7 November 2022

The following items were considered at the meeting on 7 November: -

1. Progress on Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services Action Plan
2. LA Maintained Schools - Core Offer – Overview
3. 2022 Key Stage assessment results
4. Scrutiny at Somerset Council – involvement in Task and Finish Group
5. Creation of 2 Task and Finish Groups -Sufficiency of external placements; and Home to school transport.

Fuller details about this meeting will be in my next report but I wanted to alert Council to the presentation given at the meeting on the 2022 Key Stage Assessment Results – [see supplement to agenda – pages 17 - 29](#)

We were alarmed and concerned on receiving an update on the 2022 Key Stage assessment results. We shared the shock expressed by the Lead Member about the worrying information provided by Officers that demonstrated in very stark terms that learners' educational outcomes in Somerset appeared to be poor and were declining. This meant that achievement and results of Somerset pupils had fallen below both the South West and England averages. There was a clear 'results gap' in a range of subjects and for a range of pupils, that showed an alarming decline in educational outcomes.

We request the Executive, as a matter of urgency, task Officers to undertake a review to identify the underlying issues leading to this continued under performance. This review will be of critical importance as improvements must be made across Somerset Schools to help enable all pupils to achieve better outcomes. We will be closely monitoring progress and will seek reassurance from the Executive and Officers that improvements are being made.

3. Consultations Undertaken

The Committee invites all County Councillors to attend and contribute to its meetings. The Committee Chair and Vice Chair invite prospective report authors to attend their pre-meetings and Lead Officers are engaged in this process.

4. Implications

The Committee considers carefully and often asks for further information about the implications as outlined in the reports considered at its meetings. For further details about the reports considered by the Committee, please contact the author of this report.

5. Background Papers

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

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