

SCRUTINY FOR POLICIES, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE (VIRTUAL MEETINGS FROM MAY 2020 DUE TO CORONAVIRUS)

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee held as a Virtual Committee Meeting, on Wednesday 6 May 2020 from 1.00 pm

Present: Cllr L Redman (Chair), Cllr R Williams (Vice-Chair), Cllr M Dimery, Cllr James Hunt, Cllr J Lock, Cllr W Wallace, Cllr J Williams and Mrs Eileen Tipper

Other Members present: Cllr Chilcott, Cllr Clayton, Cllr Govier, Cllr Lawrence, Cllr Nicholson, Cllr Paul, Cllr Prior-Sankey, Cllr Purbrick, Cllr Revans and Cllr Vijeh.

Apologies for absence: Mr P Elliot, Ms Helen Fenn and Ruth Hobbs.

1 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

The Chair of the Committee invited those Members present to declare any interests not already registered as personal interests, such as being members of District, City, Town and Parish Councils and, available for inspection on the Council's website. There were no declarations.

2 Virtual Committee Meetings Procedure and Guidance - Agenda Item 3

The Chair of the Committee invited the Scrutiny Manager to introduce the report and he began by noting that the same report was being considered by each Scrutiny Committee and that it set out the Council's initial guidance and proposals for conducting virtual meetings.

These reflected the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 that had given local authorities new powers to hold public meetings virtually by using video or telephone conferencing technology. This meant for the first time that elected members could attend meetings without having to be physically present in the same location.

The Chair asked if consideration could be given to webcasting meetings and it was noted that this point had been raised in other meetings and would be something considered with the on-going refurbishment of the County Hall meeting rooms. There was a question about voting and it was noted that this could be facilitated using a name call of Committee members, if required.

The report was accepted.

3 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

The Chair of the Committee asked the Clerk to confirm that no questions had been received from members of the public before the deadline. The Clerk confirmed no on time questions had been received however some questions had been received after the deadline and the Chair requested that a written response be sent to that member of the public.

The Chair confirmed he would accept questions from any elected member, at this meeting and future meetings, even if they had not contacted him prior to the meeting, as required in the Council's Standing Orders.

4 Scrutiny Work Programme - Agenda Item 5

The Chair of the Committee invited Members to consider the Cabinet's Forward Plan of proposed key decisions in forthcoming months and suggest any items for the Committee to consider. The plan was noted.

The Chair directed attention to the Committee's own work programme and invited suggestions for possible future agenda items. It was noted that the next scheduled meeting date (3 June) would now be an informal meeting.

It was agreed that the Chair and Vice Chair would liaise with Lead officers to identify items for consideration and the Chair asked Members to email him or the Scrutiny Manager with any specific areas/items they would wish the Committee to receive more information about.

5 Council response to Covid-19 - Children's Services Update - Agenda Item 6

The Chair of the Committee invited the Director of Children's Services (DCS) to introduce this report that provided details of the response of Children Services to the Covid-19 pandemic and key issues the service was attempting to address with partners, families and children in Somerset.

The DCS began by highlighting the work of the Council to ensure the Safeguarding of Children with a new operating model to both secure the welfare of children and ensure that staff and families were protected from Covid-19. This had included measures such as, where appropriate, virtual contact with families initially, followed by physical visits taking place after risk assessments.

He noted his concern at the almost 50% decline in referrals to Children's Social Care, across all age groups and all levels of need which meant that some children at risk of significant harm were not being referred for multi-agency child protection support and others aren't getting the early help they needed. He reflected that this was a pattern being seen across the country and not unique to Somerset and that ordinarily most referrals to Children Social Care

would come from Schools, District Councils, SCC Public Health services, also the Police and the NHS. However perhaps most critical to the protection of children were Schools.

Regarding Schools the DCS stated that although there was initial confusion following government announcements about the closure of Schools, this had been shortly followed by advice that Schools should continue to provide provision for children of critical workers and vulnerable children. Both locally and nationally there had been concern about the low numbers of vulnerable children attending School. Unfortunately, the government guidance in relation to vulnerable children introduced new concepts such as 'safety' which understandably, Schools and frontline staff initially interpreted as the immediate health and safety of children excluding 'safeguarding' guidance.

In addition, the DCS reported that the messaging to parents about keeping children at home and the closing of Schools had not assisted with maintaining pupil numbers. It was also clear that some families and young people were concerned about the stigma of attending School and being different from others. Children with Education Health and Care Plans were classed as vulnerable in the government guidance and subject to parental wishes were able to attend School. However, he noted there had been a low take up of those places for various reasons due to concerns about children's health and well-being as a number of those children had significant (underlying) health issues. The shielding guidance had not adequately addressed some parents' anxieties about the risks to their children.

The DCS provided an update on the Early Years sector and he began by noting that the introduction of the furlough scheme (a Government initiative to cover a percentage of the salary of employees during the 'lockdown') had resulted in some providers closing as they would cross subsidise costs from fee-paying parents.

Members noted that providers were continuing to receive their early years funding irrespective of whether they were open or closed. The DCS thought this an important measure to ensure the future viability of the early years sector in Somerset and to avoid the risk of insufficiency of places following the pandemic and easing of social mobility after the 'lockdown'.

In Somerset to help address the cost differential, a unique payment scheme had been introduced to support early years providers to ensure there were places for the children of critical workers and children of vulnerable families. This has been successful and had meant approximately 50% of early years providers had been able to continue operating whilst in many other areas of England less than a third of the early years' places had been available.

The DCS also reported that an Early Years hub model was in place across the County to ensure that settings were supported to continue to provide places. A Local Authority link worker had been assigned to each area and held responsibility for supporting those settings and ensuring that parents could access childcare where their normal provision had closed. The link worker was also responsible for ensuring that every setting continued to meet their responsibilities for supporting vulnerable children and this meant effective liaison with the area SENCO team, Health Visiting Team and Children's Social Care.

On the subject of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) the DCS explained that guidance from Public Health England and the Department for Education set out minimum requirements for Schools and social care staff, this had indicated that PPE was not required for most situations, unless a Covid-19 case was suspected or confirmed within the establishment or household. Guidance had been issued to staff and replenished stock levels in the last 2 weeks had enabled services with the most pressing needs to receive supplies in accordance with guidelines. Joint work with the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) was ongoing to try to secure a more strategic approach to supply and management. This would be important as supply chains were fragile, and demand was likely to grow in the coming months, this would be an area that would remain under close review as social mobility restrictions were relaxed.

The DCS drew attention to Appendix 2 of his report which looked further ahead to some of the likely impacts on children following the disruption caused during the COVID-19 period. Nationally there were increasing concerns that the impact of Covid-19 measures on children (with the exception of those medically at risk) could be more detrimental than the disease itself and consideration was being given to how to assess the impact on children in Somerset.

In relation to the wider community the importance of connectivity via the internet was important and enhancing the 'digital strategy' would ensure that vulnerable children were able to undertake schoolwork was be a key priority and he noted that discussions were taking place with Schools and other Council departments about this pressing priority. Work was being undertaken with Schools to understand the issues they would face and the support they would need when more pupils would begin to return in the coming months. It was recognised that this would be a challenging period not least because just under a third of the Somerset Schools' workforce were aged over 50 which presented a number of challenges for School leaders.

The Chair invited Members of the Committee to ask questions and Cllr Lock asked about the £500 allowance per child at nursery and why had this been reduced to £300 per child? And regarding the 50% reduction in referral rates,

she sought reassurance that the Council would seek out those children and check why vulnerable children were not attending school.

The DCS replied said he would feedback on the nursery fee issue later. On identifying children at risk, he noted that Children's Social Care was not a frontline service and was therefore very reliant on other agencies for referrals, particularly schools. Over the last few months the Council had worked hard with other agencies to ensure vulnerable children would be still identified and he highlighted joint work with District Councils to provide a support mechanism to help families struggling with aspects.

The Chair asked on the issue of the lower number referrals if there was a plan in place so that the Council could effectively catch up after Covid-19 and the DCS replied yes there was and he thought there would be a significant increase in referrals and demand for Children's Services. He was confident the service was well placed and prepared to be able to cope but on several aspects the Council was awaiting Government advice.

The Vice Chair did not think the report had addressed completely how Children's Services would be adapting their pre Covid-19 plans for example what in the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) would be changed. The DCS noted that the CYPP was still being implemented and would be adapted and he indicated that he would provide an update at the next meeting. He accepted that the impact of Covid-19 would impact many areas of the CYPP and as the Government had introduced time limited emergency powers more time was needed to assess those impacts and further guidance was required to outline the next phase.

The Vice Chair then asked about PPE and how long the Council would have to wait until the new arrangements came in and the DCS said the Council had joint arrangements with the NHS locally and these were being improved and strengthened, but it was clear significant amounts of PPE would be needed across various settings for at least the next 18 months.

The Vice Chair then asked about Appendix 2 of the report and the 10 negative impacts on children and he asked if the Committee could receive an update at future meetings to provide an overview on how each of those areas were being mitigated. The DCS noted that Appendix 2 was a joint document listing concerns nationally, and Somerset had no choice on how some of the Covid-19 measures were to be delivered as the Council was required to follow national guidance. Many of the areas were longer term concerns and might best be reviewed in 6- or 12-months' time, and comparisons (against other areas of the Country) would be difficult. The Chair suggested an update report contain short, medium- and long-term views with a Somerset specific and national picture for future meetings.

Mrs Tipper began by congratulating the DCS and officers for keeping services going in these difficult times. She asked about mitigation plans for the negative impacts, possible enhancement of services previously reduced, recovery for children that experienced adverse childhood experiences as there might be more children with adverse experiences needing remedial support, and not just on the academic side. The DCS agreed with the issues highlighted and he thought funding would be key going forward and many aspects and services were delivered in collaboration with or rested solely with the NHS and there had been very good multi agency working over the last few months.

Mrs Tipper thought the effect of the trauma of children, caused by the Covid-19 restrictions, might come out in time and not be immediately apparent, and in the short term there were families that had encountered financial hardship for the first time. She asked if the Council had considered alternative methods for support in local communities due to the reduced role of most Schools and the role of Foodbanks as a use of additional intelligence. The DCS noted child anxiety would undoubtedly be an issue and he noted that a survey had highlighted that the group most effected seemed to be the 18-24-year-old cohort. The Government messaging, although simplistic by necessity might result in some phobias.

Cllr J Lock asked the DCS about the DfE request to supply data on how vulnerable children were being supported, and she wondered about its purpose. The DCS confirmed that the DfE had introduced a new system for reporting and he along with other DCS's had complained about the added bureaucracy which was unhelpful at this time, and he was also not sure of its purpose or benefit. There had been no suspension of legislation only some easing of time scales so much of the activities, duties and requirements on Children's Services team remained.

The Chair asked about schools remaining open and vulnerable children and CLA/social workers and not all those places being occupied, vulnerable children we know about are being checked? The DCS replied the definition of a child with a social worker any child with social care involvement including early help services, and the Council had asked schools to identify children they would regard as vulnerable. All children with an allocated worker have been risk assessed to identify if they should be in school and the nature of support that should be in place, so there was a clear pathway for each vulnerable child. He thought that the guidance isn't helpful as vulnerable definition was those most in need and not specialist services so was different but encouraging schools to offer places and several schools had maintained contact with families.

The Chair risk level and made efforts to check on those, DCS was concerned about those not referred as without support the needs of those vulnerable

children would grow, however those children known about were being supported with good arrangements.

Cllr Prior – Sankey asked those children who would be due to start nursery/ pre-school provision (aged 3) they would now not be getting funding for those children and was anyone contacting those families? District Council families in crisis where to refer to. The DCS replied early help arrangement and guidance still in place and provision and awaiting Government guidance, if a key worker or vulnerable will support into early years provision.

Cllr Munt asked difficulty in accessing information to identify how many pre-schools and nurseries were open and how many attached to Schools, how of those nurseries had taken up their £500 per child allowance up to £6k limit. The DCS replied that he did not know that information and he would ask for a response for the Committee, but he knew that there 50% of early years places available across Somerset.

Cllr Munt accepted there had been and would continue to be excellent work by the Council and she noted that it would most unusual for people to contact her about things that were going well so where concerns had been raised she had a duty to relay those. She asked about the number of pre-schools and nurseries attached to Schools and the geographic spread and availability of places. The DCS replied that he would look at that and he knew both sectors were offering places, he recognised there would be gaps and challenges across the County.

The Chair of the Committee thanked the DCS and all Officers that had risen to the challenge to provide and maintain excellent services for Somerset children and their families. He thought that Members would want to focus attention on the 10 areas of concern identified in Appendix 2 of the report, and he would liaise with Officers to explore how an update report containing short, medium and long term views with a Somerset specific and national picture could be best reported to the Committee.

6 School Exclusions - Task and Finish Group report - Agenda Item 7

The Chair of the Committee introduced the report on behalf of the Task and Finish Group which he had Chaired. He began by thanking the Officers and professionals that had helped and been involved in producing the report and he hoped that Members had read the report and the data report also attached as an appendix.

The Group during its review of School Exclusions had visited Schools and a PRU and had held 'round table' discussions with a variety of people that had involvement in exclusions to pick up the different perspectives of those involved, including children. The Group had also closely examined various data

streams to see if there were connections and links resulting in exclusions to help shape the recommendations.

The Chair hoped that the report would assist in finding a way for Schools in Somerset to work together and develop a clear pathway for all children to ensure there was adequate support where necessary, particularly during transition between stages. He also noted that Schools should be encouraged to better support 'problem' children rather than pass them round like a hot potato. The focus should be on inclusion and child centred policies with exclusion only being used after every other option had been exhausted. The report was not negative and did not seek to impose a one size fits all.

The Chair asked for comments from the Committee and Cllr James Hunt complimented the Group for the comprehensive report and he wondered about poor morale in Schools and if this was due to the leadership within the School. The Chair noted that there were various factors that could result in low morale but there appeared to be no single factor.

The Vice Chair added his own thanks to the Group and Officers that had assisted the Group and he had found it good way for Scrutiny to work outside of formal meetings through visits communities and settings. He agreed with the Chair that the report should not be viewed as negative, and it was about supporting inclusion in Schools and trying to change the culture away from exclusion.

Cllr Jane Lock noted the report had not mentioned a link between children receiving free school meals and a higher exclusion rate amongst that cohort and she requested that the reports remark about 'off-rolling' should be stronger. The DCS noted that the practice known as 'off-rolling' was illegal and the Chair agreed to amend the report to reflect this.

Cllr Wallace commended the report and he supported the recommendations being made to Cabinet, and he agreed with the emphasis being on inclusion rather than exclusion, he asked for future reports to be more concise and to the point.

Mrs Tipper thought the report impressive, but she noted some children's poor behaviour resulted from language and communication problems and she thought progress could be made if more children had those needs diagnosed and then supported in Schools. She suggested a Somerset education charter to outline roles and responsibilities that could cover all settings and not just focus on academic settings, children with EHCP's excluded should trigger a review. She supported the emphasis of a person-centred approach rather than a process/task centred approach as this in itself would be more inclusive. The

Chair accepted this suggested enhancement of the reports call for a revised cultural approach and the Vice Chair agreed.

The Committee agreed to endorse the report on the basis that it include the minor amendments suggested, in respect of 'off-rolling' and changing the cultural approach, during the discussion.

7 Any other urgent items of business - Agenda Item 8

The Chair of the Committee, after ascertaining there were no other items of business, thanked all those present for attending the Committee's first virtual meeting and he closed the meeting at 14.40.

(The meeting ended at 2.40 pm)

CHAIRMAN