

SCRUTINY FOR POLICIES, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee held in the Luttrell Room - County Hall, Taunton, on Monday 20 June 2022 at 2.00 pm

Present: Cllr L Redman (Chair), Cllr O Patrick (Vice-Chair), Cllr S Aujla (attended virtually), Cllr J Baker, Cllr S Carswell, Cllr A Hadley, Cllr S Hart, Cllr B Height, Cllr J Hunt, Cllr E Potts-Jones, Cllr M Lovell (substitute for Cllr J Snell) and Cllr H Farbahi (substitute for Cllr J Kenton)

E Tipper, The Revd T Osmond and R Hobbs (attended virtually) - co-opted members

Other Members present: Cllr T Munt, Cllr C Ellis, Cllr A Hendry, Cllr L Trimnell, Cllr F Nicholson and Cllr J Cook-Woodman

Other Members attending virtually: Cllr N Cavill, Cllr A Dingwall, Cllr A Govier, Cllr H Kay, Cllr C Lawrence, Cllr S Osborne, Cllr E Pearlstone and Cllr R Woods

Apologies for absence: Cllr Pauline Ham, Cllr J Kenton and Cllr J Snell

1 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

The following declaration of interest was made at the meeting: -

- (a) Ruth Hobbs – co-opted member – Governor at Herne View Church of England Primary School.

2 Notes of the Advisory Board meeting held on 28 February 2022 - Agenda Item 3

The notes of the Advisory Board meeting held on 28 February 2022 were accepted.

3 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

There were no questions asked, statements made or petitions presented.

4 Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee Work Programme - Agenda Item 5

The Committee considered and noted the Committee's current work programme and meetings overview from the last Municipal Year and the Executive Forward Plan of planned key decisions in coming months including Executive meetings. The Chair also explained the role / purpose of the Committee work programme and outcome tracker.

The Chair said that there is a standing invitation for the lead members to attend the Scrutiny Committee. It was agreed that an additional meeting be scheduled for July 2022 and meetings going forward will be in the afternoon, as follows:

- Monday 25 July – additional meeting
- Monday 5 September
- Monday 3 October
- Monday 7 November
- Monday 12 December
- Provisional – budget meeting – Monday 16 January 2023

5 **Family Safeguarding - overview** - Agenda Item 6

The Chair welcomed 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 to the meeting for this agenda item.

Ms Palmer and Mr Shawcross gave a PowerPoint presentation providing an implementation update on Family Safeguarding in Somerset. Some of the key points highlighted were –

- Provided details about Family Solutions Somerset and the family safeguarding model in Somerset and the timeline
- Outlined what has been learnt so far in terms of strengthening partnerships and the challenges around virtual recruitment, induction and team building, accelerated phasing due to the impact of the pandemic and the need for virtual recruitment and inductions etc
- Provided details on number of children looked after and number of child protection plans
- Detailed the positive impact and highlighted a case study, and feedback from a family, social workers and adult practitioners
- SCC commissioned York Consulting to undertake an evaluation. The interim evaluation report received in November 2021, had been positive and highlighted some issues for consideration – impact of the pandemic on the implementation; the 'workbook'; increasing complexity of cases.

The Committee discussed the presentation, and the following questions and issues were raised and responded to, as follows: -

- Success of the work – it was agreed that the Evaluation Report will be circulated to the Committee for information
- Pleased to see the fall in numbers of child protection plans and children in care, but could this be attributed to identification of families – there are a number of ways to provide support to children and families and its around providing support the most effective way and to escalate /

statutory interventions where it is appropriate to do so; the early support teams have also increased to support families as well

- The 'technical issues' mentioned about adoption – explained that this related to issues around reporting by the Medical Advisor and the Courts and is a national issue; this was resolved early this year and have made some adjustments to how the medical advice is presented; the Courts Service has a backlog of cases which are being expedited and the backlog of cases will be dealt with soon
- Increase in behaviours that challenge and whether is this being reflected in the numbers / cases coming through in social care – referred to the slide which highlighted that there are particular factors which are impacting on the work being done in family safeguarding and across the service as a whole and there is a significant and noticeable increase in complexity, particularly based around parental and child mental and emotional health and some of that is reflected in what is happening in schools and are now seeing an increase in numbers of referrals and requests for help
- Suggestion made that there should be focus on looking at children committing domestic abuse against their parents – this area will be looked at
- Question about threshold for referral into social care – clarified that the thresholds have not changed in terms of support offered and what families are able to receive; the focus is on the child's needs and for them to get the right help they need at the right time
- Question asked about the 'workbook' issue raised earlier – explained this is an issue for practitioners and mentioned Liquid Logic, which is the system used in Somerset
- Query about what perhaps is not working so well currently and what the Evaluation Report may say – the team has been working closely with the consultants and know that the issue of the workbook and caseloads will come up in the evaluation - in terms of the of the actual practice model and the way that it's working / implemented, is largely positive; issue of recruitment and filling posts to begin with may also feature – are catching up with up that now and recruitment is much better in terms of the adult focus support
- Query whether the teams have adequate staffing numbers – the staffing numbers for the teams in each area was outlined; each of the teams has 6 social workers each and specialist practitioners working alongside them in each team; also mentioned the recent successful recruitment to the mental health posts and a number of new social workers starting; mentioned the 'step up to social work' graduate programme
- Query about adoption and if there are adequate families to adopt – mention made of partnership approach and do promote adoption as a permanent option for those children who need it; mentioned Special Guardianships; are also seeking foster carers too

- Are there any issues around data sharing and will the unitary journey impact this going forward – confirmed that data sharing is not an issue, due to work done when the service was commissioned; already have good / positive joint working across the 5 Councils
- Asked for details and information on Somerset’s statistical neighbours for Children’s Services – confirmed that they are Devon, Suffolk, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Cornwall, Dorset, Norfolk, Gloucestershire, East Sussex, Wiltshire. The Chair asked that this information is included in the glossary of acronyms.

On behalf of the Committee the Chair thanked Ms Palmer and Mr Shawcross for the excellent presentation.

6 **School Place Planning** - Agenda Item 7

The Chair welcomed the Council’s Assistant Director, Education Partnerships and Skills, Amelia Walker, the Assistant Director Inclusion, Dr Rob Hart and the Strategic Manager, Phil Curd to the meeting for this agenda item. They provided a PowerPoint presentation which offered an overview of school and early years places.

The Committee noted the pupil numbers in Somerset schools, 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 and why some places aren't being taken up; special educational needs and disability numbers; the new Education White Paper and academisation, which the Committee will look at in the future; clarification that although projections showed the school population might be reducing in future years, there are no plans to close schools; school transport issues; the opportunities available for people to become school governors.

On behalf of the Committee the Chair thanked Ms Walker, Dr Hart and Mr Curd for the informative presentation.

7 **Items for Information** - Agenda Item 8

There were no items for information.

8 **Any other urgent items of business** - Agenda Item 9

There were no other items of business.

(The meeting ended at 4.37 pm)

CHAIR