

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 7 November 2022 at 1.00 pm

Present: Cllr L Redman (Chair), Cllr O Patrick (Vice-Chair), Cllr S Aujla, Cllr J Baker, Cllr S Carswell, Cllr A Hadley, Cllr B Height, Cllr J Hunt, Cllr J Kenton, Cllr E Potts-Jones and Cllr M Lovell
R Hobbs, E Tipper and The Revd T Osmond – co-opted members

Other Members present: Cllr T Munt and Cllr F Nicholson

Other Members present virtually: Cllr C Ellis, Cllr A Govier, Cllr S Osborne, Cllr E Pearlstone, Cllr L Trimnell and Cllr R Woods

Apologies for absence: Cllr S Hart and Cllr J Snell

1 **Declarations of Interest** - Agenda Item 2

There were no new declarations of interest made at the meeting.

2 **Minutes from the previous meeting held on 3 October 2022** - Agenda Item 3

The minutes of the meeting held on Monday 3 October 2022 were approved and signed as a correct record.

3 **Public Question Time** - Agenda Item 4

Mr Whittaker asked a number of questions relating to the Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services and to policies and procedures in Somerset in particular relating to Special Guardians (who provide care to children when their birth parents are unable to and is in between foster care and adoption) and provided details of his family's experience of being a Special Guardian.

The Executive Lead Member Cllr Tessa Munt apologised to him for the experiences he described and that the Council values the work of Special Guardians. The Lead Officer, Mr Paul Shallcross echoed the comments and said he was saddened he feels so unsupported and ignored and the aim is to always provide the best possible level of care for Special Guardians.

The Executive Lead Member and Lead Officer offered to meet with Mr Whittaker to help move things forward. The Chair asked for a written response / outcomes from that meeting.

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

The Committee considered and noted the current work programme and outcome tracker and the Executive's Forward Plan of planned key decisions in the coming months.

The Chair advised that a meeting of the Scrutiny Chairs would be taking place later in the week.

It was agreed that:

1. The following 2 Task and Finish Groups be established – (a) Sufficiency of external placements; (b) Home to school transport. The Governance Manager will email Committee members for expressions of interest (max 4 per each Task & Finish Group) and to circulate a note providing greater detail on tight timeframe for the work (reporting back to January meeting).
2. The work plan and outcome tracker be updated.

5 **Progress on Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services Action Plan - Agenda Item 6**

The Committee received a presentation from the Council's Acting Assistant Director Community and Strategy, Paul Shallcross on the Inspection of Children's Services progress on action plan.

Somerset Ofsted in 2022 had two named areas for improvement –

- placement sufficiency, including for emergency admissions, for older children with complex needs – the efforts already made in Somerset were recognised by Ofsted, for example Homes and Horizons
- the take up of return home interviews and use of data to inform individual and service planning.

Mr Shallcross advised about the post Ofsted service planning 2023/24 and there is a draft plan in place following extensive consultation and further consultation on final draft is planned for the end of November. There are five key areas of focus:

- workforce
- prevention
- protection
- care
- partnership and strategy

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

- comments made that it would have been helpful to have seen the presentation ahead of the meeting
- how working in partnership with neighbouring authorities and cross border working especially around exploitation and missing young people – explained the close working by the Police and the work of the Missing and Vulnerable Exploitation Panel; there is good communication and working with partners in a number of different forums / different local authorities with the south west; referenced the regional approach taken to understanding how exploitation affects the South West and also focussing on Somerset
- question about how feeding back to governors and schools and how involving governors who are community representatives and therefore in a strong position to feed in their local intelligence / perspectives – education is a key element of safety and resilience for children and young people, and that are working closely with colleagues across Children’s Services and not only in Children’s social care, which enables a focus on the importance of education as a way of protecting children and see schools as most important safeguarding partner
- question about children and young people who are missing or perhaps elsewhere and monitoring / how ensure they are safe – confirmed that there are processes in place
- the Chair reminded members of the opportunities to visit their local services to help understand the bigger picture around many different processes
- mention about the innovative work being undertaken with Homes and Horizons, which was recognised by Ofsted and is being looked at for its innovative nature.

On behalf of the Committee the Chair thanked Mr Shallcross for the detailed presentation.

It was AGREED:

1. That the draft plan be shared with the Committee.
2. The Committee asked to see the Improvement Plan in 6 months’ time (around May 2023).
3. The Committee noted the role of the Corporate Parent Board and that potentially the Board may ask Scrutiny to look at the two main themes (e.g return home interviews).

The Chair also congratulated both the Acting Director Children’s Services Claire Winter and Mr Shallcross on their recent appointments.

6 **LA Maintained Schools - Core Offer - Overview** - Agenda Item 7

This is a pre-Executive Scrutiny Item.

The Committee received a PowerPoint presentation from the Council's Assistant Director Education Partnerships and Skills, Amelia Walker, who provided an overview of the proposed changes to the LA maintained schools core offer. She advised that the policy will be considered by the Council's Executive at its meeting on 14 December and the Scrutiny Committee will consider the full business case prior to that, at its meeting on 12 December 2022.

Ms Walker highlighted the risks if there was no change – resource compartmentalisation; short-term granularity; inability to flex to demand; the 'moral hazard' (to risk) and compliance. She then highlighted the issues needing to be addressed – cost pressures; academisation; long term planning; compliance failures and crises. The 4 main options available and strategic mitigation were then highlighted. The preferred offer is option 3, which is to reform the service and charging to provide higher income but with value added to service to mitigate (core offer), as this is the only option where risk is manageable.

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

- Question about option 2 (do minimum – pass on the entirety of cost pressures to schools with no added value) – confirmed this option has not been completely ruled out but the preferred option is option 3. Have consulted on what is effectively option 2 because option 3 has not yet been to the Executive for decision and do not have agreement to take that option forward. Need to make sure from statutory perspective that it not agreed that there is another option available (and did not default to option 1 (do nothing, absorb cost pressures, and cut services))
- With reference in the slides to governors not having a consistent understanding of what compliance entails and their responsibilities and asked whether any training has been / will be provided – explained that the full details of what the core offer would entail is not provided in the papers but what have shared with schools is a draft in terms of the potential deliverables for inclusion in a core offer
- Question whether other organisations can / will offer this core offer to schools- highlighted the scope of the business case and that there is currently not a not robust market in place
- Questions about the cost pressures information detailed in the papers, for example in April 2023 will lose ~£500k from the removal of the LA Monitoring and Brokering Grant (funds school improvement posts) – explained these were government grants and were withdrawn nationally, following consultation last year. Did put up stout defence about it and made clear the impact would have

- Question about the 2030 target for full academisation and if achievable – focus on full academisation is in the Schools White Paper and are required by law to cooperate with academisation. In the recent staff reorganisation made clear that the local authority is not a company and that it is important that all staff, regardless of where they are in organisation, can see how their work tracks back to the children and what they are doing to help them receive the best education possible and improve outcomes. Are operating within a system where a decision as taken in 2015 that education would be funded by trading and in order to do the improvement work required, can only do that if trade
- Question about the options of a local authority (LA) multi academy trust (MAT) – mentioned good relationships with Diocese of Bath and Wells. Options though for a LA MAT option is not currently enabled by the government. What is enabled is the creation of additional MATs where the local authority is part of setting it up but is not part of running it

On behalf of the Committee the Chair thanked Ms Walker for the detailed information.

It was AGREED that:

1. The paper to be considered at the Executive meeting on 14 December be shared with the Committee and this include details of the Equality Impact Assessment undertaken.
2. This will be the substantive agenda item at the next meeting of the Committee.

7 **2022 Key Stage assessment results** - Agenda Item 8

The Committee received a PowerPoint presentation from the Council's Assistant Director Education Partnerships and Skills, Amelia Walker, who provided further details on 2022 education outcomes. The Committee had already received information on the Somerset's school's performance data for 2022.

Ms Walker outlined the 'headlines' from the data which: -

- show very weak performance across the board, including in phases which were previously stronger
- GCSE preliminary results looked more positive, provisional results are now in and are very poor
- Somerset now clearly one of weakest areas nationally
 - In top ten LAs nationally for number of inadequate schools
 - Weakest GCSE attainment and progress in the Southwest
 - Ongoing decline in outcomes for most disadvantaged
 - Outcomes have declined compared to national in every phase
 - Focus in schools is on SEND but this is not what is driving underachievement
 - Economic development focus is science – this subject is polarised

The Committee had a detailed discussion on the information presented and the following questions and issues were raised and responded to, as follows: -

- GCSE data and science having highest proportion of pupils not passing whereas the individual science subjects (Biology, Physics, Chemistry) is one of the county's strongest subjects – the subject is polarised and want to do some further analysis to understand the makeup of pupils who are being put forward for the different examinations to help understand why this is happening.
- The impact of shift to on-line learning in pandemic, digital poverty and whether had impact on achievement and also school readiness – some factors would also affect other areas / statistical neighbours who would have similar issues around rurality and isolation, but the pattern of performance is not matching other areas and pupils have done less well. Its about the basics of education and quality of schools across the piece and this is being reflected in Ofsted judgements. With regard to early years, there is fragility of this sector and the financial pressure on the sector is acute.
- Questions about the information presented for SEND pupils –pupils with SEND do have a lower level of attainment and progress than in other parts of the country, but the gap is smaller because all pupils are at such a low level
- Is there a plan to address quality of teaching – explained work of the Education Strategy Board and Strategy being developed and hopes to come back to the Committee soon with the plan
- Question asked about the slide information which had been shared before the meeting is same as presented in the PowerPoint presentation – confirmed information is same but the slide with the chart on KS2 disadvantaged pupils has been updated and the updated pack will be recirculated.
- Query about what causing quality of decline and if its funding, staff, infrastructure - there does need to be more work done to better understand 'the why' and factors could be (a) the way academisation happened in Somerset (high level fragmentation / high number of single Academy Trusts, / high number of small Academy Trusts; (b) way support structures; (c) have fantastic teacher and leaders but consistency; (d) fragmented system in county with mix of a 2 tier and 3 tier systems - legacy of all factors over period of many years.

In view of the seriousness of the information presented, it was AGREED that the Committee would write to the Leader of the Council expressing alarm and concern and requesting 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 is of critical importance as improvements must be made in Somerset Schools to enable all pupils to achieve better outcomes.

The Committee will be closely monitoring progress and will seek reassurance from the Executive and Officers that improvements are being made.

8 Scrutiny at Somerset Council - Agenda Item 9

The Committee considered a report from the Council's Scrutiny Officer, Jamie Jackson which was seeking nominations from the Committee to sit on a forthcoming scrutiny Task and Finish Group.

The Task and Finish Group will meet to discuss and eventually draft a set of proposals as to how scrutiny should be structured and how it should operate within the new unitary authority from April 2023. It was confirmed that seeking 3 representatives from the Committee.

It was AGREED that members would be contacted separately, asking for expressions of interest. The Committee NOTED the time commitment involved between mid-November and mid-January 2023.

9 Items for Information - Standing Item - Agenda Item 10

The Committee noted the following items for information:

- (a) Briefing on Wyvern Nurseries – Implementation Update
- (b) SEND, Data and Commissioning FAQ's – key points from SEND, data and Commissioning workshop on 28 September 2022
- (c) Member Development Panel information
- (d) Education and Inclusion Services redesign / restructure – follow-up update.

10 Any other urgent items of business - Agenda Item 11

There were no other items of business.

(The meeting ended at 3.30 pm)

CHAIR