

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Childrens and Families held in the Luttrell Room - County Hall, Taunton TA1 4DY, on Wednesday, 13 September 2023 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Leigh Redman (Chair)

Cllr Evie Potts-Jones (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Suria Aujla

Cllr Simon Carswell

Cllr Peter Clayton

Cllr Andy Hadley

Cllr John Hunt

Cllr Jenny Kenton

Cllr Martin Lovell

Cllr Frances Nicholson

Cllr Richard Wilkins (substitute for Cllr J Ruth Hobbs – co-opted member Snell)

Eileen Tipper – co-opted member

In attendance:

Cllr Tessa Munt

Cllr Jo Roundell Greene

Other Members present remotely:

Cllr Adam Boyden

Cllr Dawn Denton

Cllr Andy Dingwall

Cllr Marcus Kravis

Cllr Sue Osborne

Cllr Heather Shearer

Cllr Lucy Trimnell

1 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Councillor J Snell (substituted by Cllr R Wilkins) and

Councillor J Baker (no substitute).

2 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

The following declarations of interest were made at the meeting:

- (a) Cllr F Nicholson – agenda item relating to education modelling – Frome (item 7 refers) – co chair of Governors of 5 schools in Minehead and area mentioned in discussions – personal.
- (b) Cllr P Clayton – agenda relating to Regional Adoption Agency (item 8 refers) – have consultancy contract and independent panel member for Adopt South West – personal.
- (c) Ruth Hobbs – co-opted member – going through mediation with Somerset Council regarding child’s EHCP – personal.

3 Minutes from the Previous Meeting held on 12 July 2023 - Agenda Item 3

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee - Childrens and Families held on 12 July 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

4 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

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

5 Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families Work Programme - Agenda Item 5

The Committee received and noted the current work programme and outcome tracker and the Executive’s Forward Plan.

The Chair highlighted the following:

- The additional meeting on Wednesday 25 October at 10 am at Deane House, Taunton will be a joint meeting with the Scrutiny Committee – Adults and Health;
- The meeting on 15 November will be held in the Sedgemoor Room, Bridgwater;
- There will be an additional meeting on Tuesday 12 December at 10 am and this will be held in the Chamber at Brympton Way, Yeovil;
- To note that Committee Members will be invited to attend the Adults and Health Committee on 7 December for the following agenda item – Overview

of Crime & Disorder.

6 2023/24 Children's Services - Budget Monitoring - Agenda Item 6

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from the Council's Strategic Manager, Finance Business Partnering, Sian Kenny, on the 23/24 Children's Services budget as at the end of July 2023 (Month 4).

Ms Kenny outlined that the 23/24 Children's Services (General Fund) has a net budget of £123.1m and has forecast overspend of £8.8m (7.1% of budget). This variance is in External Placements. The full year projection is £131.9m. The key cost drivers, risks, issues, and opportunities were highlighted.

Ms Kenny also referenced the Dedicated Schools Grant (DGS) which has £14.1m forecast in year deficit; cumulative £34.8m deficit. The key cost drivers including with the High Needs Block, risks, issues, and opportunities were highlighted.

The Committee asked a number of questions and made a number of comments which were responded to at the meeting, as follows:

- Clarification on the 23/24 DSG key cost drivers and the total number of EHC Plans (slide 10) – *confirmed that the number referred to active ones in place in Somerset; the need is coming from young people; each plan is subject to annual review;*
- School transport (mainstream and SEN) (slide 8) and when will the Committee be provided with the report from the review, as had been promised at the last meeting of the Committee – *officers apologised for the delay in providing this and that it will be shared following the meeting;*
- With reference to the actions being undertaken by DMT's (slide 13), and the authorisation of social care packages, would like more information on that especially around respite provision and what means; would also like more information on the diagnostic review of Children's Services; the High Needs overspend is major issue for Somerset – *in response to the points it was explained that the 55 local authorities that were part of the delivering better value (DBV) programme received £1m grant each (irrelevant of the size of the local authority / needs). That was received at the start of this financial year and there is an Inclusion Transformation programme and the projects in the programme are being developed; noted there is a plan to bring the CS transformation programme at the November meeting of the Committee; the DBV programme is a national programme and is cross cutting. Referred to the all-member briefing on education finance which is being repeated on 14 September – the invitation will be shared with the co-opted members on the*

Committee as well. A briefing note on decision making for social care packages will be shared.

- *Need to ensure keep children and young people are at heart of all decisions; question on the General Fund income budget (on slide 5) – agreed with comment that keep children and young people at centre; the £89.0m income budget is a mix; reference made to overachievement of savings through homes and horizons and recognise efforts of staff and team as a whole; are using every opportunity to get funding from DfE and are pursuing a number of avenues. The overspend detailed on this slide (slide 5) is being driven by external placements (£8.8m forecast overspend).*

In conclusion: -

- It was noted that children’s mental health issues will be considered at the January meeting of the Committee.
- With regard to EHCP’s, the Chair asked that a paper be circulated, explaining how they come about, process, numbers and secondly asked for a written report about the IMPOWER early intervention and support / diagnostic review.
- The Chair asked that the next presentation / report include a table showing the current position (so shows where ‘are’ currently); it is welcome that ‘risks’ are being identified but need more information / detail so the Committee can delve deeper.
- The Chair thanked officers for the detailed presentation and asked that going forward the information be provided in advance of the meeting, particularly as the information is so complex.

7 Education Modelling - Frome - next steps - Agenda Item 7

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from the Council’s Service Director, Education Partnerships and Skills, Amelia Walker and the Head of Education Places, Phil Curd. They provided an update on the on-going work and discussions about education structures in the Frome area.

Mr Curd explained the background to the discussions and the face-to-face meetings which have taken place - in January 2023, the Council began a discussion about education structures with schools in the Frome area, which is a complex education area. It opened with a survey of school leaders to understand the impact of the current structures and what changes they might make and what benefits any changes would bring. In March 2023, a report was sent to school leaders outlining the feedback provided through the survey. This was then followed by a meeting at Selwood Academy which all 18 of Frome’s schools attended along with representatives from the Diocese of Bath & Wells and the Regional Director’s Office.

At this meeting, schools asked to explore some options that would allow Frome to become a 2-tier education area and to meet individually with officers on their school sites.

Mr Curd then explained that by May 2023, officers had prepared a number of 2-tier models and visited each of the 18 schools to discuss the modelling and other educational issues in Frome. At the end of May 2023, another meeting was held at Selwood Academy to discuss the modelling and other areas of interest discussed during the visits to school sites.

He explained that while there was not a general consensus to adopt a 2-tier model in Frome, there was an appetite to progress discussions further, over an extended period of time, introduce other elements and invite other stakeholders to engage in the process. At regular intervals, the 8 councillors representing the Frome were given updates on discussions and the likely direction of future work. A community statement was issued on 21 June. Officers began preparations for the extended piece of work. A further survey was sent to school leaders asking them to confirm what subject areas they would like discussions to cover and which other stakeholders they would like to invite to participate.

A Steering Group will begin meeting in the autumn. These will be in-person meetings held at a venue in Frome. Subject areas are likely to include:

- Education Structures and Partnerships
- Post-16 Provision
- Early Years
- SEND and Vulnerable Learners

Frome Town Council is very keen to be involved in this work and has provisionally offered to host the Steering Group's meetings.

The Committee asked a number of questions and made a number of comments which were responded to at the meeting, as follows:

- Have governors and families been involved in the conversations – *the multi academy trusts and many chairs of governors have all been involved in initial discussions; whilst have not engaged with wider community at this point, if get to the point where there is a proposal, before any statutory process happens will informally consult with the community, to sense check 'where we are and where we are going' and it will be a collaborative process ('gradually widening circles'). Not clear at the moment any change is necessary.*
- If there are any plans to look at the Minehead area – *would only participate in a conversation if there was an invitation to do so / approach from education leaders.*
- Question about the problem trying to solve - *in Frome it was by invitation and*

there are many views, drivers behind it and its slow conversation, so no solution is being imposed; the Frome area has range of issues, structures and partnerships. Are looking at school place planning generally in Frome area as well.

- Are encouraged by discussions and have asked that the Frome LCN receives a presentation on this as well

In conclusion the Chair thanked Mr Curd and Ms Walker for the presentation and invited them to come back to Committee to a future meeting if need to do so. The Committee welcomed and noted the update.

8 Regional Adoption Agency - Agenda Item 8

The Committee considered a [report](#) presented by the Council's Service Director, Children and Families Jayne Shelbourne-Barrow regarding the proposed changes to the Regional Adoption Agency (Adopt South West). The Independent Chair of the Operational Board, Alison Davis and Service Manager, Cornwall Council, Julie Goodwin also attended the meeting.

The paper sought the Committees' views on:-

- (a) the request from Cornwall Council to join the Regional Adoption Agency – Ms Shelbourne-Barrow explained Somerset Council is on the governance board and has been fully engaged in the discussions and there are no issues from Somerset's perspective to Cornwall Council joining, it has outstanding Adoption Services and Ofsted and will open up other adopters as well;
- (b) the request from Adopt South West to revise the funding formula for each Council's contribution to the agency – Ms Shelbourne-Barrow said that the funding formula has been revisited and feel that it does reflect activity and will increase the Council's contribution financially, which has been budgeted and noted;
- (c) the options in terms of the timescale for phasing in any agreed change in funding arising from a change in formula – Ms Shelbourne-Barrow said that Somerset's preference had been for 3-year phasing however the consensus had been for a two year phasing, which the Directors agreed.

The Committee asked a number of questions and made a number of comments which were responded to at the meeting, as follows:

- with regard to the formula adjustment – will relook at Cornwall's contribution as well (if they join)? – *the funding formula does reflect proposed activity; will review this after 3 years, to ensure have got the percentages right.*
- Clarification requested on the percentage figures detailed on page 5 of the

report - *it was agreed that further clarification would be provided and circulated to the Committee.*

- Query about the position re Isle of Scilly following their recent Ofsted judgment - *noted they have been linked to Essex on improvement journey who have good record of supporting council's.*
- Query about the 'gain' for Somerset - *around delivering better adoption services as part of Adopt South West - this opens up opportunities for more adopters which is positive.*

The Committee was generally supportive of the proposal and asked that the position re Isle of Scilly (Ofsted judgement) be included in the decision-making report.

9 External Placements Task and Finish Group - response from Executive on recommendations made by the Task and Finish Group - Agenda Item 9

The Committee had considered and agreed the report of the External Placements Task and Finish Group at its meeting on [6 March 2023](#).

Further to the meeting on [4 May 2023](#), the Committee considered the [update](#) from Cllr Tessa Munt, the Executive lead member for Childrens Services on the recommendations made by the External Placements Task and Finish Group.

The Chair thanked Cllr Munt for the update. The Chair also highlighted that Task and Finish group report is useful to explaining different terms (between registered / unregistered placements etc).

The Committee noted the response.

10 Learning from the West Somerset Opportunity Area - Agenda Item 10

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from the Council's Head of Vulnerable Learners, Julia Ridge on the learning from the West Somerset Opportunity Area programme. The Executive Head Teacher of the Moorland Federation, Naomi Philp, also joined the meeting for this item.

The Opportunity Area was funded and managed by the Department for Education. West Somerset was 324 out of 324 Local Authorities for Social mobility and one of 12 chosen to explore ways of improving social mobility through education. The overarching ambition from the DfE was that - no community left behind. Putting real emphasis on the range of places where resources and additional targeting are

needed the most, with the West Somerset Opportunity Area (WSOA) at the sharp end to tackle the most entrenched disadvantage.

The presentation referenced the evaluation undertaken of the WSOA, five externally funded projects which align (such as holiday activities with food), five examples of local practice which align (such as stronger partnership working between schools) and Local Community Networks. Mrs Philp explained that from schools perspective it had been a very inclusive and transformational experience as well.

The Committee asked a number of questions and made a number of comments which were responded to at the meeting, as follows:

- Excellent work in early years – are still some schools around Minehead area getting poor Ofsted; training centre Bridgwater and Minehead provision has been ‘divided up’ will there be enough room to deliver now on what envisaged originally – *the bid said ‘a provision’ in Minehead, and no building identified specifically – it is happening and if can share costs with another organisation, it is helpful. Mentioned that Ms Philp is Chair of Governors at West Somerset College and there is connectivity between schools in the system. Ms Walker referred to the standing panel on Education Standards, which Cllr Hadley will be part of.*
- The Executive are looking at the outcomes report – delivery, progress, and wider benefits – and take what can across the Council.
- Idea of training centre in Minehead is welcomed, but rurality of area still and jobs do not pay enough to meet childcare costs.
- Transport costs issue also mentioned – there is no regular bus service bus from Minehead to Bridgwater – *post COVID there is complexity around housing / second homes, impacting on recruitment of teachers too; people in rural area not confident about buses, reliability, mentioned an App which helps, which First Bus uses.*
- Mention also made of the Cornwall campaign around second homes.

In conclusion, Ms Philp said that she had been delighted to be involved in the project and was proud leading the way in many ways. There is work to be done still in West Somerset (school transport, recruitment) and hoped that the new Council did not lose sight of this.

The Chair thanked Ms Ridge and Mrs Philp for attending the meeting and for their detailed presentation on the learning from the WSOA and that Somerset as a whole gained from the project.

The Committee noted the update.

11 Items for Information - Standing Item - Agenda Item 11

Noted that the briefing on Education Data will now be circulated after the meeting.
There will be a presentation on this at the November meeting.

(The meeting ended at 12.59 pm)

.....

CHAIR