

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families held in the John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton TA1 1HE, on Wednesday, 13 March 2024 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Leigh Redman (Chair)

Cllr Evie Potts-Jones (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Suria Aujla

Cllr Andy Hadley

Cllr Henry Hobhouse (sub for Cllr Snell)

Cllr Marcus Kravis

Cllr Frances Nicholson

The Revd Tobie Osmond – co-opted member

Cllr Peter Clayton (attended remotely)

Cllr Pauline Ham

Cllr John Hunt

Cllr Martin Lovell

Jo Simons – co-opted member (attended remotely)

In attendance:

Cllr Liz Leyshon

Cllr Heather Shearer

Other Members present remotely:

Cllr John Bailey

Cllr Hilary Bruce

Cllr Jo Roundell Greene

1 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Cllr Jeny Snell (substituted by Cllr Henry Hobhouse), and Ruth Hobbs (co-opted member). Cllr Peter Clayton and Jo Simons (co-opted member) joined the meeting online.

2 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

There were no new declarations of interest received.

3 Minutes from the Meeting held on Wednesday 10 January 2024 - Agenda Item

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee - Childrens and Families held on Wednesday 10 January 2024 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 Chair invited comments and questions on the current work plan and outcome tracker for the Committee. One member asked out the process for ensuring that all questions and information's requests from members of the Committee are responded to appropriately and in a timely manner.

The Chair advised that generally the Committee's outcome tracker serves this purpose, and that while every effort is made to capture and respond to all questions and requests for information both in and out of committee meetings i.e. email enquiries etc. members may follow up on any unresolved issues up with an email directly to him to follow up.

The Committee noted the current work plan, outcome tracker and Executive Forward Plan.

6 Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing in Somerset - Agenda Item 6

(Members of Scrutiny Committee – Adults & Health had been invited to join the meeting for this agenda item).

The Chair welcomed the follow to the meeting for this agenda item:

- Patsy Temple, Public Health Consultant at Somerset Council
- Claudine Brown, Head of CAHMS and Paediatric Services in Somerset
- Nick Harwood, Chief Executive of Young Somerset
- Tracey Robinson, Team Leader at The Jigsaw Project Young Somerset

The Committee received a detailed [presentation](#) which provided an update on Somerset system-wide support for children and young people who self-injure. This followed on from the presentation to the meeting in June 2023 and demonstrates how a multi-agency system approach will deliver the best outcomes for children and young people in Somerset. The presentation provided information and data around hospital admissions, the number of mental assessments being carried out among children and young people in Somerset, results from surveys and engagement projects, details around the services that are being provided by all the agencies

involved, and the Public Health training offer.

The Committee were advised that, reassuringly, in terms of young people requiring mental health/emotional wellbeing intervention in Somerset, there has been a downturn in the numbers.

The presentation also included a list of recent improvements in Childrens Mental Health Services in Somerset, with a special focus on a targeted youth support project for children and young people that have been admitted to hospital due to mental health difficulties or low emotional wellbeing named The Jigsaw Project. Members heard about a day in the life of a Jigsaw Support worker and the story of Poppy and her family who needed support from the Jigsaw Project following a hospital admission.

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

- A Cllr asked the committee and officers to consider what 'timely' means.
- A Cllr commended the work of officers and remarked that it was the best presentation he has seen.
- A Cllr felt the presentation was about reactive support and asked for more information about the way this Council proactively supports children and families in the community i.e. through outreach in schools.

The Chair thanked officers for the presentation and the Committee noted the update.

7 2023/24 Children's Services - Budget Monitoring - Agenda Item 7

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from the Council's Head of Business Partnering, Christian Evans on the 2023/24 Children's Services month 10 budget monitoring position. The presentation focussed on external placements monitoring and forecasting, CLA key cost drivers and the 23/24 DSG budget monitoring (High Needs, home to school transport and SEND transport).

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

- A Cllr felt the visual representation of the data could be improved.
- There were several queries regarding the data around placements and SEND and the Head of Business Partnering advised that these would be taken to the relevant service managers for response following the meeting.
- A Cllr sought clarity on the difference between unregulated and unregistered

provision and the Executive Director of Children, Families and Education explained the differences and also advised about the campaign to increase foster care placements would help meet the target for registered placements.

The Chair thanked officers for the presentation and the Committee noted the update on the budget position.

8 DSG Deficit Management Plan (DMP) - Agenda Item 8

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from Jo Currie, Service Manager Schools Finance and Amelia Walker, Service Director Education, Partnerships and Skills on the High Needs Block & SEND Deficit Management Plan.

The Committee heard that the Designated Schools Grant (DSG) Deficit Management Plan (DMP) has four new elements to mitigate overspending, and the presentation sets out the rationale behind the proposed changes in approach to tackling overspending on DSG blocks, which is a national issue, and the mitigations in place before the statutory override ends on 31st March 2026.

The Committee were advised that the DMP will take a huge amount of work, and the next steps include stakeholder workshops to look at rethinking and redesigning structures, funding, processes and governance.

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

- The Chair asked about how the DSG 'sits' in relation to EHCP plans. The Service Director explained the funding arrangements and how the money is dispersed to schools.
- A Cllr felt that EHCP's are not always the only solution.
- A Cllr asked about how confident are we that such reforms will not impact the service in a negative way?
- Members requested more information on supported internships and the Service Director advised that the service would be able to facilitate a briefing session for members.
- A Cllr asked about what guidance and support can the Council seek when developing the DSG DMP? It was explained that there is guidance and support provided by the DfE and also the plan has gone to CIPFA for advice and feedback.

At the end of the discussion, Amelia Walker, Service Director Education, Partnerships and Skills said that she is happy to arrange a member training session

on the Designated Schools Grant Deficit Management Plan.

The Chair thanked officers for the informative presentation and the supporting documentation that had been shared with members and the committee noted the ongoing work of the DSG Deficit Management Plan.

9 Understanding Elective Home Education - Agenda Item 9

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from Dr Rob Hart, Service Director for Inclusion and Julia Ridge, Strategic Manager Head of Vulnerable Learners who provided an introduction and overview of Elective Home Education (EHE).

The presentation set out the Council's approach and responsibilities to EHE children and their families, the current data set for EHE in Somerset and specifically Frome as an 'area in focus' due to its high number EHE children, and the changes to government guidance and legislation in the pipeline including mandatory registers of children not in school, guidance around what is considered to be a 'suitable education', more support for EHE families and guidance on Local Authority schools attendance orders.

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

- A Cllr said they had visited a local EHE alternative education setting and was concerned that the children in that setting felt that 'the Council does not care.'
- A Cllr queried whether EHE settings have any relationship with Ofsted and was advised that Ofsted do not regulate EHE settings directly.
- A Cllr queried whether the Council monitors attendance of EHE children or is a parent free to take their child out of education, for holidays etc, as often as they choose; whether parents can access the National Curriculum; in its EHE regulatory role, does the Council require proof that those children that are electively home educated receive 'a suitable level of socialisation.' In response, the Service Director Inclusion said that the Council does not monitor the attendance of EHE children in the same way that it does for children who are in education settings – however in its role the Council does look for assurance that the education being offered to EHE children is 'full time and suitable.' In terms of supporting EHE settings with national curriculum resources, reference was made to [Bridgwater College Academy - Get Ahead Programme](#) and [Oak National Academy \(thenational.academy\)](#).
- A Cllr queried if there is a potential for flexi schooling, so that families can 'touch base' with schools for support and was advised that the Mainstream Plus offer is helping schools to respond to a wider range of needs in communities.
- A Cllr asked about what has been learnt from the 'area in focus' study on Frome

and was advised that one of the key findings was about the need for the Council to do more around Public Health and ensuring EHE children have been offered all relevant vaccinations.

- A Cllr asked about what data we have around EHE children going into Higher Education and was advised that there is currently no data on this.
- A Cllr asked about the drivers for parents/carers choosing to home educate, and to what extent this choice is down to preference, rather than necessity. The Service Director Inclusion agreed that there are number of reasons for parents/carers choosing to home educate, and that in some cases this choice is also driven by 'off rolling' - in the past there have been examples where families are encouraged to choose home education, because that would be an alternative to either prosecution around attendance or exclusion; Ofsted routinely ask to see files of children who have been taken off the school's roll to be EHE to check; another example is around growing numbers of children for whom it feels like schools 'aren't working for them' and so choose to EHE. The Service Director also referred to the SomersetWorks service, which is open to EHE children.

The Chair thanked the officers for the excellent presentation and the Committee noted the information provided.

10 Update from Education Standards Standing Panel - Agenda Item 10

Cllr Evie Potts-Jones provided a verbal update on the work of the Education Standards Panel and issues covered at recent meetings.

Cllr Potts-Jones advised that the Panel had considered data in terms of benchmarking against other areas and to gain a snapshot of trusts across the county. Cllr Potts-Jones shared the headline data from Early Years through Key Stage 4, highlighting weaknesses in Early Years Education Standards in Somerset. The Panel had considered the reasons for this, such as fractured contact with health visitors, and noted that the Best Start in Life steering group would be best placed to tackle this.

Cllr Potts-Jones concluded that the work of the Panel is ongoing and that it will continue to review the data around education settings and maintain engagement with leaders. She invited all members of the Committee to attend the meetings of the Panel and advised that the next meeting was scheduled for the 25 March 2024.

The Chair thanked Cllr Potts-Jones and the members of the Panel and invited all members of the committee to be involved in the work and attend the meetings.

11 Report back from committee members on Children's Services Transformation Priorities /Areas - Agenda Item 11

The Committee received the following verbal [updates](#) on the Children's Services Transformation priorities / areas, as follows: -

Connect Somerset

Tobie Osmond (co-opted member) provided the update on Connect Somerset, which was designed help people feel more connected to their schools, communities and vital services. He advised that comms is going very well, with the Connect Somerset network reaching wide audiences which are continuing to grow, and that workforce development had been a success with 12 Connect Somerset Champions now working in strategically placed posts across Somerset provided targeted support to those in need.

Children Looked After (CLA) Transformation

Cllr Martin Lovell updated on some of the actions that had been identified through the 7 transformation priorities including increasing foster homes for children with a foster care recruitment programme, a new 16+ service, a purchase order pilot for external placements, and the implementation of the Mockingbird model, and advised that a Sufficiency strategy had just been published and the Homes and Horizons programme is ongoing.

Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) Strategy

Cllr Frances Nicholson summarised that the SEND strategy's primary focus is working together with mainstream schools to ensure every child with SEND is supported, as early as possible, so that all families can access the right support at the right time.

Education for Life Strategy

Jo Simons (co-opted member) advised that through a huge amount of data analysis the Education for Life Strategy has identified 5 priorities, with its focus on building strong foundations for children's education in Somerset.

The Chair thanked members for their ongoing work and the Committee noted the updates.

12 Items for Information - Standing Item - Agenda Item 12

The Committee noted the following items for information:

- (a) Delivering Better Value – Newton Report – circulated on 3 January 2024

(b) Short break provision – action plan – circulated on 21 February 2024

(There is a useful ‘glossary of terms’ document for the Committee, which is available on the website on the following link – [Glossary of Terms](#)).

(The meeting ended at 1.30 pm)

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CHAIR