

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil BA20 2HT, on Tuesday, 12 December 2023 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Leigh Redman (Chair)

Cllr Evie Potts-Jones (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Suria Aujla

Cllr Simon Coles (sub for Cllr C Ellis)

Cllr John Hunt – attended remotely

Cllr Frances Nicholson

The Revd Tobie Osmond – co-opted

Cllr Simon Carswell

Cllr Andy Hadley

Cllr Martin Lovell

Ruth Hobbs – co-opted

Jo Simons – co-opted

In attendance:

Cllr Tessa Munt

Cllr Heather Shearer

Other Members present remotely:

Cllr Mandy Chilcott

Cllr Liz Leyshon

Cllr Jo Roundell Greene

1 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Councillor C Ellis (substituted by Cllr S Coles), Cllr P Clayton (no substitute), Cllr J Snell (no substitute) and Mrs E Tipper (co-opted member).

2 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

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

Ruth Hobbs referred to the declaration made at the meeting on 13 September 2023 re mediation with Somerset Council regarding child's EHCP and advised that the issue had been resolved, meaning the declaration can now be removed.

3 Minutes of the Meeting held on 15 November 2023 - Agenda Item 3

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee - Childrens and Families held on Wednesday 15 November 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 plan and outcome tracker and Executive Forward Plan.

A key area of focus will be the budget situation and the implications of the current financial situation on Children's Services – the Chair and Vice Chair will discuss and meet with the relevant Executive members, to look at the best way members can monitor and focus on this in more depth.

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

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from Christian Evans, the Council's Head of Business Partnering Finance and colleagues on 2023/24 Children's Services budget monitoring, the forecast outturn as at end September (month 6) and verbally updated on the latest position, which is showing the position is worsening, mainly due to situation around external placements.

The presentation focussed on home to school transport (mainstream and SEN), the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and in particular the High Needs forecast deficit position and the statutory override situation.

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

- *Trend in numbers of residential and unregistered placements (slide 8) and budget last year in the 2 areas* – the unregistered placement numbers have been decreasing in the current financial year, driven largely by the Homes & Horizons initiative – eventually there will be none in unregistered placements; residential placement numbers have been increasing over this period, particularly in the current calendar year, and more than was reasonable foreseen and budgeted for. With regard to the budget last year in 2 areas - will come back on numbers.

- *Home to school transport (slide 10) – the Chair said that it is important for the Committee to understand the difference between ‘mainstream home to school transport’ and ‘SEND transport’ (statutory / non statutory elements) – noted that for SEND transport, the key driver is cost, rather than the numbers involved. There is more competition in the SEND transport (market) than in mainstream transport (market). The delay in special schools coming on stream also has implications on this and the budget. Also look at issues of mainstream / safe routes periodically and are undertaking work in identifying where the most expensive settings are.*
- *Concern amongst upper tier authorities about the position re the DSG situation referenced on slide 10 – the DSG is held in a ‘crystallised reserve’ which sits with the DfE – also referred to the member briefing held in September which provided more detail on the DSG.*

It was noted that the Council is refreshing the DSG Deficit Management Plan and this will be presented to the Scrutiny Committee early next year.

- *Query about the Delivering Better Value / SEND programme work and its impact moving forward – this programme is a DfE led programme which started in 2022 and proposal agreed April '23 – it is too early to say the difference being made by the programme and should start to see impact in 24/25 financial year – the Newton report has been previously shared with the Committee and the Schools Forum and this will be recirculated for reference.*

The Chair thanked the officers for their work and the Committee noted the update.

7 Education, Health and Care Assessment and Plan 2022-2023 - Progress update - Agenda Item 7

The Chair welcomed Dr Rob Hart, the Council’s Service Director Inclusion and Claire Merchant-Jones, the Council’s Head of SEND for this item.

The Committee considered a [report](#) and received a [presentation](#) which provided a progress update on special education needs & disabilities (SEND) – improvement activity and education, health and care plans (EHCP), providing a summary of the data, improvements, impact and ongoing challenges in relation to how the local area has continued to respond to delivering EHCP’s across Somerset since the reinspection of SEND services in November 2022.

The Accelerated Progress Plan was signed off by the DfE in May 2023, there are monthly progress reports to the SEND Partnership Board, six-month reviews with DfE and NHSE.

Dr Hart highlighted the following -

- the key headline is the increase in numbers of plans and the number of annual reviews - there has been a decrease in number of tribunals registered (slide 5).
- the situation re-funding and placements and that following the recent education funding consultation (presented to Scrutiny meeting in November '23) are developing proposals to allocate more high needs funding to schools without need for an EHCP and to make banding more equal between mainstream and special school (slide 6).
- the position re SEND in Somerset schools (slide 7) and since 2018 there has been 2.6% increase in total pupil numbers and 78% increase in pupils in specialist settings.
- the position re Annual Reviews / timeliness (slide 8) and referenced the LGCSO decision (slide 9) - the link to the Ombudsman report will be shared with the Committee.
- performance against annual review timeliness will continue to challenge the LA as the number of EHC plans it needs to maintain continues to grow.

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

- *the number of EHC assessments refused, referred to in Table 3 of the report and what happens* - has been increase in the number of cases requesting assessment - the majority of requests for assessment are from schools, rather than from parents. Where the decision is taken to refuse to assess, they can appeal and engage with the advisory teaching teams to work with the schools and their families to identify how best to support the child / young person; an EHCP should not be seen as 'an end in itself' and is - at best - a 20-week process; the number of plans issued is detailed in Table 4 of the report; the decision can be taken to assess and then not issue a plan - this is a small number and officers will provide the information on this.
- *Questions about the increase in SEND in Somerset schools (slide 7) and number of EHCP's* - the Chair asked Cllr Nicholson to send in her questions and so that responses can be recorded.
- *Having more plans in place means needing to undertake more reviews - have enough staff capacity to cope?* - there is clear link with the education finance consultation and the aim to have more SEN funding in schools so get the right support without the need for an EHCP; annual review process highlighted and the actions underway to support improvements in this area (detailed in paragraph 3.9 of the report); there was turnover of staff historically - mentioned support in place.
- *Do know why the number of requests are increasing?* - situation is complex and do not think there is a single reason - could perhaps be because of the new legal framework; issues around funding; changes to curriculum and inspection regime

in last 10 years; impact following the pandemic of children who have struggled to engage in school; national problem and system is not working for all stakeholders or achieving great outcomes for children & young people; the DfE is supporting 89 local authorities to help reduce the deficit.

The Chair thanked officers for the presentation and the Committee agreed:

1. To note the update on EHCPs and the ongoing challenges for teams across the Council and wider partners.
2. To note the activities underway to support improvements:
 - Annual Planning Meetings offered (and monitored) to every school across Somerset to identify children requiring support from specialist LA teams.
 - Clarify expectations with schools to ensure that appropriate advice and support in advance of meeting.
 - Notes the additional staff in place to process Annual Review reports in a timely way.
 - The scrutiny committee to receive an update in 6 months on impact / uptake / number of reviews completed and so on (KPIs & training).

8 Connect Somerset - Agenda Item 8

The Committee received a [presentation](#) on [Connect Somerset](#) from Richard Selwyn, the Council's Service Director Children's Commissioning, together with Dave MacCormick (Holyrood Academy Head Teacher) and Ingrid Edginton, Champion for ASC & CSC Needs, Chard area.

[Connect Somerset](#) is about working together across public, voluntary, faith and community sectors to improve the lives of families and residents and is a way of delivering early help in the community, connecting / building on existing networks with the aim of more efficient public sector delivery model.

Mr MacCormick and Ms Edginton outlined what is happening in the Chard area and work undertaken to roll out the early help model to other areas.

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

- *Roll out in Langport and so on, huge patch* – the focus this term has been around Chard area, will then roll out early help model to other town – already made connections with schools for example.
- *Would be worth sharing the model / best practice examples so can cascade across system* – noted - it is a relational model and that will have different approaches in different areas; have 12 amazing Champions / local leaders,

helping to set up Connect Somerset in each neighbourhood and change the culture in public services and so are community-orientated; team around the school model, is a fundamental model, change demand; local hubs and resources – work with what’s existing rather than setting up something new; universal offer is a way of increasing volume of early help that is accessed particularly by the most vulnerable families; highlighted the workstreams and timeline to 2030.

- *How plan to keep people involved / informed* – communications are ramping up and would encourage members to meet with their respective Connect Champions.
- *Are schools nervous about this being additional work for them (also suggested the website name needs a rethink)* – team around school model has been done by others and is around relationships – Champions and Relationship Managers and so on – it is relationship based and will take time and is the starting point; also work around shared data / shared case management system.
- *Do the Champions areas align to the LCN boundaries* – around working together and how trying to proceed – 2 geographies essentially – NHS is around primary care and there are 13 of those, co-terminus with the 12 champions’ areas – and the LCN geographies (local democracy areas) – every Champion attends their local LCN meeting.

The Committee thanked officers and the community leaders for attending the meeting and noted and welcomed the update.

9 Children's Services Transformation Priorities 2023 - 2026 - Agenda Item 9

The Chair referred to the discussions at the last meeting of the Committee on [the Children’s transformation priorities](#) and invited volunteers to focus on particular strands of the transformation priorities, to allow individual meetings with officers to gain a better understanding / learn more about one of the areas, as follows:

- Education for Life
- CLA Transformation
- SEND Strategy
- Connect Somerset

The following Committee members expressed an interest in the areas:-

- Education for Life – Jo Simons;
- CLA Transformation – Cllr E Potts-Jones, Cllr M Lovell;
- SEND Strategy – Cllr S Carswell, Cllr F Nicholson;
- Connect Somerset – Tobie Osmond, Ruth Hobbs.

Noted.

10 Items for Information - Standing Item - Agenda Item 10

There were no items for information considered at this meeting.

(The meeting ended at 1.15 pm)

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CHAIR