

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, 7 August 2024 at 9.30 am

Present:

Cllr Leigh Redman (Chair)
Cllr Evie Potts-Jones (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Simon Carswell	Cllr Andy Hadley (attended remotely)
Cllr Pauline Ham	Cllr John Hunt (attended remotely)
Cllr Alistair Hendry	Cllr Marcus Kravis
Cllr Martin Lovell	Cllr Frances Nicholson

In attendance:

Cllr Heather Shearer

Other Members present remotely:

Cllr Andy Kendall	Cllr Jo Roundell Greene
Cllr Sarah Wakefield	

1 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Cllr J Snell and R Hobbs (co-opted member). Cllr J Hunt and Cllr A Hadley joined the meeting remotely.

2 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

The following additional declaration of interest was made:

- (a) Cllr E Potts-Jones – advised that is now working for a Member of Parliament - personal interest.

3 Minutes from the Meeting held on Wednesday 26 June 2024 - Agenda Item 3

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families held on Wednesday 26 June 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 Committee received and noted the Committee's current work programme, outcome tracker and the Executive Forward Plan of planned key decisions in the coming months including Executive meetings.

The Chair highlighted that the next meeting is on Wednesday 18 September at 10am and will be held in the Sedgemoor Room, Bridgwater House, King Square, Bridgwater. Items to be considered at the meeting will include:-

- (a) Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Group – Cllr Nicholson had attended the meeting of the Group on 25 July 2024 on the Chair's behalf and will forward her specific points / comments to the Chair. The Chair mentioned the item for information on the agenda (item 10), which included information from the Joint Scrutiny Group meeting;
- (b) Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) of Somerset - serious youth violence - action plan

The Chair also said that he wants to have a conversation to identify and review the issues the Committee should be looking at in its work plan.

6 Children's Services - Budget Monitoring - Month 3 - Agenda Item 6

The Committee received a [presentation](#) from the Council's Head of Finance Business Partnering, C Evans who provided an update on the budget position for Children's Services - Month 3 (2024/25), with a £5.4m forecast overspend (3.8% of budget). The overspend predominantly relates to external placements (residential, unregistered), education cost pressures, DSG High Needs Block.

The Committee discussed the update, asked a number of questions and made a number of comments, which were responded to at the meeting:-

- query about external placements and information in the table on page 27 – *mentioned the 'residential parent and child' placement is not one used very often and is usually ordered by the Family Courts – when do use them, they are very expensive because the risks are so high and due to its nature, is also unpredictable; there are delays in the Family Courts system as well because the court system is overwhelmed which can have an impact on this.*
- external placements and query about the 'other' figure in the table on page 27, and what is included – *this includes other smaller placement types such as secure placements; leaving care accommodation costs – further details will be circulated to the Committee.*
- query about the £5.4m forecast overspend figure. The Chair mentioned that the two main areas of overspend have been external placements and home school transport and the Committee has done Task and Finish Group's on both issues – the item on the agenda later at the meeting on Transport will reference this – *in response to the points referenced, do try to pull every lever to do best thing for child; for example the Homes and Horizons intervention is helping to disrupt the marketplace.*
- requested details on the 'unregistered placements' and information about the impact of the pause of Homes and Horizons – *the Executive Director provided current position on the 5 unregistered placements and also the impact Homes & Horizons is having; 5 are open and 3 are being built but have been delayed due*

to capacity in corporate teams – homes 6 and 7 are delayed between 4 and 6 months; home 8 is delayed by about 3 – 4 months; having an impact on savings as homes and horizons for the most complex children is significantly lower cost than unregistered placement. She also referenced the Children’s Transformation Board which is chaired independently.

- the Committee agreed to ask the Executive to highlight if there are any Council related blockers to try to resolve them.
- query whether the budget setting is realistic in the first place – *budget is based and set on very clear / in depth modelling, but number of children in care has rise by 15% and this was not expected as the number of children in care has been reasonably consistent over a number of years – split between children under 2 in foster placements and 10-15 year olds with complex needs and are in residential care; insufficiency of foster placements both in the Council and nationally – noted the Committee will receive the Children’s Transformation Board deep dive report on CLA at its next meeting.*
- query about school exclusions – *not all children excluded from school come into care system; small proportion of the children who are excluded from school do come into the care system because of getting involved in other things, including serious violence; explained the purpose / use of the revenue grant and DSG; also doing work on ‘banding’ (amount schools receive for children and specific needs at different levels) it is a complex piece of work and this will come to the Committee to look at as well.*

In conclusion, the Chair said that he was sure that all Committee members would find it helpful to contact their local operations office or go into a school or education team as part of their learning and to ask questions between meetings to help build their knowledge / information base. Following a young person’s journey ‘through the service’ is also informative and interesting.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair thanked officers for the presentation and the Committee noted the budget position.

7 Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) of Somerset - serious youth violence - Report and Action Plan - Agenda Item 8

The Chair welcomed the following to the meeting for this agenda item - C Winter - Executive Director of Children, Families and Education, L Simpson, Area Commander, Somerset and North Somerset (Avon & Somerset Police) and M Davis, Designated Nurse, Safeguarding Children (ICB) attending on behalf of S Meldrum Chief Nursing officer & Director of Operations (ICB).

The Committee received a [presentation](#) which provided details of the outcome from the recent Somerset Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) – serious youth violence. In May, the Care Quality Commission, His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, Ofsted and His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation jointly inspected the Somerset area’s multi-agency response to children over 10, who are at risk of, or affected by, serious youth violence in the county. The report from the inspection, in the form of an ungraded letter was published on 18 July 2024 – [JTAI of Somerset](#).

They explained that in relation to the headline findings for the area inspection, it was

not a positive outcome:

- the inspection found that partnership working between organisations is not effective in identifying, understanding or responding to the extent of serious youth violence and criminal exploitation of children in Somerset.
- the oversight of partnership working, led by the Safer Somerset Partnership and the Somerset Safeguarding Children's Partnership lacks rigour, drive and challenge. These issues were accepted by both partnerships during the inspection process and work began immediately to plan a more impactful approach.
- serious weaknesses in multi-agency practice across organisations has meant that risks are not identified at the earliest opportunity.
- good practice was identified, for example in the system overall that responds well when there is clear and immediate risk to children at risk of serious youth violence.
- are determined to improve and was disappointing and worrying outcome from inspection.
- the Safer Somerset Partnership and the Safeguarding Children's Partnership, currently Chaired by Ms Winter has already met and are already collating action plans from all relevant organisations and strategically on behalf of each Partnership to improve partnership working in reducing serious youth violence and criminal exploitation in Somerset. These plans will be submitted to Ofsted by the Chair of the Safeguarding Children's Partnership, on behalf of the 3 Lead Safeguarding Partners by 25 October 2024. (This is the date set by the Inspectorates) - intend to submit in September as already understand what need to do and already working on the actions in the action plans.
- the multi-agency action plan will be considered at the next meeting of the Committee and the multi-agency plans will also be overseen and tested for effectiveness via the Integrated Care System Children and Families' Board, which meets every 2 months.

The Committee discussed the headline findings, covering governance and multi-agency safeguarding practice, asked a number of questions and made a number of comments, which were responded to at the meeting:-

- would like to understand what 'exploitation' includes – *includes County Lines, criminal exploitation, wide range of issues; will provide precise definition to the Committee.*
- Query about cross border partnership working – *do have regional policing responses for example, sharing intelligence and mapping across the southwest and responding appropriately; do need to form stronger system relationships across borders rather than just in individual organisations.*
- children have legal right to be educated to the age of 18, what happens if they are suspended, permanently excluded from school – *the local authority has duty to provide a level of education by day six post exclusion (just over a week); the provision unlikely to be another school because schools/ system is struggling, explained funding of SEND; always better for children to be in school, local to their own community with own friends.*
- questions about sharing information; who are the partners – housing teams?; role of community policing teams - *the intelligence picture - are pockets of front-line good practice; needs to be consistency; mentioned one team working which is part of the partnership focus; mention that all agencies will have own set of actions – there are, for example, 11 specific actions for the police; intelligence*

sharing (by police with partners) has been highlighted and a criticism to police was around how it is cascaded in way it should; issue is essentially that as a result of those action plans, actually more effective at safeguarding children; evaluation is integral to any action plan; mention of data sharing work around safeguarding; Inform work mentioned.

- quality of practice, getting systems right and role front line staff – *mentioned quality assurance process already in SCP; there is already multi-agency auditing happening and the current focus is on serious youth violence; do talk to front line practitioners; also statutory section 11 audit each year about safeguarding in general as well.*
- good to see that CAMHS are making timely response but query about their resources and capacity – *understanding it was they had reduced the waiting time for actual assessment and then on-going treatment.*

In conclusion, the Chair thanked Ms Winter, Ms Simpson and Ms Davis for the presentation and for attending the meeting.

The Committee noted the headline findings from the inspection. There will be the opportunity to explore the issues in more detail when the Committee considers the action plan at the next meeting.

8 Equality Due Regard requirement for Scrutiny - Agenda Item 7

The Chair welcomed the Council's Health Promotion Manager, Equalities, T Rutland to the meeting for this agenda item.

The Committee considered a [report](#) on the responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010, namely scrutiny members duty to have 'due regard' to the Public Sector Equality Duty as part of their role as Scrutiny members, following the peer challenge in relation to compliance with the quality framework for local government and the areas to focus on.

The Committee discussed the issues, asked a number of questions and made a number of comments, which were responded to at the meeting – covering, the role of scrutiny; access to training which is available to members and mention about the work of the Member Development Panel and looking to updating the members' pages on the website to signpost to training opportunities available; referred to the links set out in part 6 of the report and in particular the link to the Council's Constitution, which highlights the responsibilities and the requirements that scrutiny should be doing around the equality impact assessments and equalities agenda.

The Committee:

1. Reconfirmed their commitment to equality 'due regard' being part of its Scrutiny function.
2. A briefing paper for scrutiny be provided and to support further training opportunities that are provided for the delivery of this commitment.

9 School Transport Project - Agenda Item 9

The Chair welcomed the Council's Strategic Manager, Head of Education Places, P

Curd and the Council's Service Manager Transporting Somerset, J Perrett to the meeting for this agenda item and which was introduced by the Lead member for Children, Families and Education, Cllr Shearer.

The Committee received a [presentation](#) which provided an update on the school transport project.

The Committee discussed the presentation, asked a number of questions and made a number of comments, which were responded to at the meeting:-

- noted that school transport is a significant cost pressure for the Council (mainstream and specialist settings) and the work being done / intervention to offset cost increases.
- query about disabled access transport, suitable and needs being met – *explained that operators have to meet certain criteria and buses are required to be accessible.*
- the data provided about transport costs is helpful - *are performing well per capita head rate compared to comparator authorities; the School Travel Cost Management Strategy work had been presented at Scrutiny in [October 2022](#) and the member-supported Task & Finish Group was proposed. In May 2023, Edge Public Solutions published its review of home to school transport in Somerset and this work had also been shared and discussed with the Task and Finish Group and Scrutiny members; identified a number of supply side initiatives which could result in savings including around procurement; findings from the review helped inform Transport Review Project, overseen by new Transport Board; the new purpose built data dashboard is crucial to decision-making.*
- query if can include for example, data from Devon CC in the comparative data – *will see if can pool data from county council's and add to the dashboard.*
- question about the use and take up of extended / additional transport entitlement grants (page 42) – *will respond to query outside of meeting.*
- reverse auctions, SEN contracts and continuity of staff – *is condition of contract that they do everything can to maintain that continuity and this is monitored, to see how it works with the 20 contracts that have gone out on that basis.*
- query about access / accessibility to paid seats – *advised that the Public Sector Vehicle Accessibility Regulations applies to school transport as well; there are accessible coaches but are very expensive to operate; the situation currently is that have prioritised the routes that go into sixth form schools and still offering pay seats on those routes and using exemptions which are still available to deliver that.*
- query about the costs per head of transporting pupils and whether use existing bus routes – *most of the public transport network, particularly that is funded, is focussed on getting students to the 5 FE colleges in Somerset; do buy tickets where can on local bus services.*
- query about safe transport – *make use of geo mapping data and as part of the project have undertaken a review of all of those unsafe routes to see if there are corrections which can be made, which can help take vehicles off the road; are working with highways for example, to see if a formal crossing can be put in in one area (Bridgwater) which would result in taking 3 coaches off the road each morning; also working with planning colleagues around new housing developments and safe walking routes to the education infrastructure, so new developments do not result in additional school transport journeys.*
- query about centralised picks ups – *have started to introduce more centralised*

pick up points, where it is appropriate, at risk assessed locations and especially where have a significant amount of scale; will continue to collect children from their home address if centralised pick up is not appropriate for them.

- *questions about the reverse auction process – use knowledge of the transport officers on what the right price should be, which will show if it is too low / high and so far there has not been anything unrealistic ‘in the market; are taking time over this issue and will look at performance, sustainability over period of time.*
- the Chair thanked the officers for the presentation and commended them on the journey and good work, which has been shared at national forum’s, in particular around the data dashboard, which will have a huge impact on ability to target work.

The Committee welcomed and noted the on-going work, successes, for example in licensing, which has resulted in 32 new taxi operators approved and registered since Dec 2023, taking the total to 164 (the highest number ever had) and the innovation around procurement.

10 Items for Information - Standing Item - Agenda Item 10

The Committee noted the following items for information:

- (a) [Suicide Prevention Strategy for Somerset Consultation](#) - circulated on 25 July 2024.
- (b) 2024 KS2 headline data – circulated on 25 July 2024.
- (c) Briefing note on academisation / decision making process and procedure – circulated on 31 July 2024.
- (d) Information about the Regional Adoption Agency Joint Scrutiny Group meeting held on 25 July which considered the [Adopt South West Annual Report 2023/24](#) – circulated on 30 July 2024.

The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Wednesday 18 September 2024 at 10am and will be held in the Sedgemoor Room, Bridgwater House, King Square, Bridgwater.

(The meeting ended at 12.10 pm)

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CHAIR