

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families held in the Luttrell Room - County Hall, Taunton TA1 4DY, on Monday, 10 February 2025 at 10.00 am

**Present:**

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

Cllr Simon Carswell	Cllr Peter Clayton
Cllr Andy Hadley	Cllr Pauline Ham
Cllr Alistair Hendry	Cllr John Hunt
Cllr Marcus Kravis	Cllr Martin Lovell
Cllr Frances Nicholson	Ruth Hobbs
S Nowakiewicz	Cllr Heather Shearer

**In attendance:**

Cllr Jo Roundell Greene

**Other Members present remotely:**

Cllr Lucy Timnell	Supt Lisa Simpson
Cllr Norman Cavill	Rev'd Tobie Osmond
Cllr Andy Kendall	Mary Cox

**21 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1**

Apologies were received from Councillor Jenny Snell.

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

No additional interests, new or updated declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

**23 Minutes from the Previous Meeting - Agenda Item 3**

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families held on 09/12/2024 be confirmed as a correct record.

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

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

## **25 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.

## **26 JTAI Update - Agenda Item 6**

The Chair invited the Lead Member for Children, Families and Education and the Executive Director – Children, Families and Education, to update the committee on Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI).

The following questions were discussed –

1. The Chair asked if there is a risk register for your objectives, and can it be shared? And was assured that there is a risk register in the safeguarding Children's Partnership, which can be identified and shared. The police also have a risk register with commonalities that fit through the JTAI.
2. What are the expectations from the inspecting bodies if the expected progress is not made, and what are the consequences?  
The inspection feeds into individual inspectorate inspections. The police's recent inspection highlighted areas requiring improvement, which relate to the JTAI outcomes. Similar feedback will be reflected in CQC and Ofsted reports. There is also an action plan that was submitted to Ofsted, but it is not a public document and hence, wasn't brought to this committee.
3. What about multi-agency auditing and the involvement of staff from one agency in another agency's audits? Multi-agency audits are planned, including visits and system reviews. The governance structures are being reviewed to ensure effective collaboration.
4. How are we assured that all organizations are using the information appropriately in multi-agency meetings? The operational meetings are being set up to ensure effective information sharing and community group involvement. The governance structures are being improved to ensure focused content.
5. How do we ensure the voice of the child is heard, and what about professional curiosity? Efforts are being made to hear the voice of the child through community groups and schools. The focus is on consistent responses and proactive engagement.
6. Why only three trial areas, and how many could there be in an ideal scenario? The focus is on one geographic area with three levels of meetings to ensure processes work before rolling out across the county.
7. Is there an active role for GPs in Somerset in the multi-agency approach? GPs have safeguarding leads and are involved in providing information for child protection case conferences. There is ongoing work to improve GP involvement and support.
8. How do we see young people as both victims and perpetrators, and how do we address this duality? The system is working to see children as children first, addressing their needs holistically. The police and health services are adopting trauma-informed approaches.

## Actions and Recommendations:

**Risk Register Development:** Develop and share a risk register to track progress and identify areas of concern.

**Multi-Agency Auditing:** Implement multi-agency audits to ensure effective governance and accountability.

**Community Engagement:** Engage with community groups to gather feedback and ensure the voice of the child is heard.

**Enhanced Training:** Provide ongoing training for practitioners on recognizing and addressing serious youth violence.

**Governance Improvement:** Simplify governance structures to improve collaboration and reduce duplication.

## 27 DSG Deficit Management Plan - Agenda Item 7

The Chair invited the Lead Member for Children, Families and Education and the Service Director –Education, to update the committee on DSG Deficit Management Plan.

The Designated Schools Grant (DSG) is a crucial funding mechanism for schools, providing financial support for various educational needs. During the meeting, the committee focused on the DSG Deficit Management Plan, which aims to address the financial challenges faced by schools in Somerset.

- **Deficit Management Plan:** The plan is being revised by external consultants to ensure a sustainable approach to managing the DSG deficit. The timeline for the revised plan is rapid, with decisions expected within the next three to four weeks.
- **Impact of Previous Actions:** The original deficit management plan aimed to reduce the deficit, but it has not achieved the desired financial impact. Positive indicators and groundwork laid by the original plan will be built upon in the revised plan.
- **Participation and Quality Assurance:** High participation levels in pilot work around financial pressures, particularly in Yeovil. Concerns about quality assurance in independent non-maintained special schools and EO task packages, with efforts to improve QA work included in the education restructure proposals.
- **Class Sizes and Funding:** Addressing the impact of larger class sizes due to falling birth rates and tighter funding. Proposed mitigation focuses on creating small class sizes for children who need them.
- **Government and National Regulation:** Discussion on the statutory override for the DSG deficit, scheduled to expire in March 2026. Addressing high needs funds not covering the costs of school placements and the need for national regulation of independent school charges.

The Chair invited the members of the committee to ask any questions. The following points were discussed –

- What is the timeline for the revised deficit management plan being put together by external consultants? The timeline is very rapid, with decisions being made within the next three to four weeks. The new plan will build on

the existing groundwork.

- What is the impact of the actions marked as complete in the original plan? The original plan aimed to bring down the deficit, but it has not had the desired financial impact. However, there have been positive indicators and groundwork laid for future actions.
- What percentage of schools have been involved in the pilot work around financial insufficiency pressures in Yeovil? There was a very high level of participation, with only two schools in the wider area not contributing.
- What is the quality assurance on independent non-maintained special schools and EO task packages, and what support is there for families? There are concerns about QA in this area, and efforts are being made to improve it. The education restructure proposals include creating capacity for QA work.
- Will larger class sizes due to falling birth rates and tighter funding have a long-term impact on this side of things? The proposed mitigation focuses on creating small class sizes for children who need them, with a maximum of six to eight children per class.
- What do the rates and bands on the graphs represent, and what does dysregulation mean? Rates represent the number of children per 10,000. Bands represent the severity of need based on criteria. Dysregulation refers to the inability to regulate emotions, leading to extreme behaviours.
- Why are there still 102 places that haven't been taken in special schools? The 102 places are due to children progressing to the next stage of education, and these vacancies will be filled in September.
- Has there been any indication from the government about extending the statutory override for the DSG deficit? The statutory override is scheduled to expire in March 2026. It is unlikely that the government will allow it to time out without action, given the potential for multiple local authorities to declare bankruptcy.
- How is Somerset addressing the high needs funds not covering the costs of school placements, and is there a plan to regulate independent school charges nationally? Somerset is addressing this issue on the National Forum. There is a need for national regulation of independent school charges.
- What about the consultation regarding funds for mainstream schools to align with special schools? The consultation aims to address the fundamental challenges faced by mainstream schools.

### **Actions and Recommendations:**

- **Revised Deficit Management Plan:** Develop a revised DSG deficit management plan with the help of external consultants. Ensure the revised plan builds on the groundwork laid by the original plan and addresses the financial challenges effectively.

- **Impact Assessment:** Assess the impact of actions marked as complete in the original plan to understand their effectiveness and use the findings to inform the development of the revised plan.
- **Pilot Work Participation:** Ensure high levels of participation in pilot work around financial insufficiency pressures, particularly in areas like Yeovil.
- **Quality Assurance (QA):** Improve quality assurance for independent non-maintained special schools and EO task packages. Include QA work in the education restructure proposals to create capacity for this important task.
- **Class Size Management:** Address the impact of larger class sizes due to falling birth rates and tighter funding. A focus on creating small class sizes for children who need them, with a maximum of six to eight children per class.
- **Government Directive Implementation:** Implement the government's directive for a register of children educated at home. Conduct assessments for children leaving special schools to ensure appropriate support.
- **Statutory Override:** Monitor the statutory override for the DSG deficit, which is scheduled to expire in March 2026. Prepare for potential government action to address the financial challenges faced by multiple local authorities.
- **National Regulation Advocacy:** Advocate for national regulation of independent school charges to address high needs funds not covering the costs of school placements.
- **Enhanced Training:** Provide ongoing training for staff on financial management and quality assurance to ensure effective implementation of the DSG deficit management plan.
- **Stakeholder Involvement:** Involve stakeholders, including schools and community groups, in the development and review of the DSG deficit management plan.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Implement a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to track the effectiveness of the revised DSG deficit management plan.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish feedback mechanisms to gather input from schools, parents, and staff on the implementation and impact of the DSG deficit management plan.
- **Collaboration with National Bodies:** Collaborate with national bodies and forums to address the broader financial challenges faced by schools and advocate for necessary regulatory changes.

## 28 Wellbeing and Schools Bill - Agenda Item 8

The Chair invited the Executive Director – Children, Families and Education, to introduce this information item. The chair advised that the committee members look at the report and inform the Chair of any questions or queries. The item was not presented in detail due to time constraints.

The Wellbeing and Schools Bill focuses on enhancing the mental health and overall wellbeing of students within the educational system and to create a supportive and nurturing environment for students, addressing their mental health and overall wellbeing through comprehensive measures and resources.

The Chair requested for this item to be brought back to the committee in the future.

## **29 Reviewing Education Systems Governance - Agenda Item 9**

The Chair invited the Service Director – Education, to introduce the committee to this item. It was noted that this item would be brought back for Scrutiny in future to be looked at in more detail.

The members raised confusion regarding this item and the Chair requested a meeting be set up outside of Scrutiny to clarify the same.

## **30 Somerset Schools' Assessment and Attainment Results - Agenda Item 10**

The Chair invited the Committee Vice Chair to introduce this item.

The Service Director – Education, presented the item.

**Overall Performance:** The presentation highlighted the latest test scores and grades, showing how Somerset schools compare to national averages.

**Areas of Concern:** Specific subjects and year groups were identified as needing improvement due to lower attainment levels.

**Impact of Funding and Resources:** The presentation discussed how funding and resource allocation affect school performance, noting that schools with limited resources are struggling more.

**Support for SEND Students:** The performance of students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) was a key focus, emphasizing the need for additional support and resources.

**Future Plans and Initiatives:** Upcoming initiatives aimed at improving assessment and attainment results were outlined, including targeted interventions and additional training for teachers.

**Data Analysis:** Detailed data analysis provided insights into performance trends and helped identify specific factors contributing to lower attainment levels.

**Stakeholder Feedback:** Feedback from teachers, parents, and students was presented, offering valuable insights into the challenges faced by schools and the effectiveness of current initiatives.

**Recommendations for Improvement:** Several recommendations were made to improve assessment and attainment results, such as better resource allocation, enhanced support for SEND students, and targeted interventions for underperforming subjects and year groups.

The Chair invited the committee to ask any questions, and the following were noted -

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- Why are there still 102 places that haven't been taken in special schools? The 102 places are due to children progressing to the next stage of education, and these vacancies will be filled in September.

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- How is Somerset addressing the high needs funds not covering the costs of school placements, and is there a plan to regulate independent school charges nationally? Somerset is addressing this issue on the National Forum. There is a need for national regulation of independent school charges.
- What about the consultation regarding funds for mainstream schools to align with special schools? The consultation aims to address the fundamental challenges faced by mainstream schools.

**31 Items for Information - Standing Item - Agenda Item 11**

The Committee noted the following items for information:

No items of information were shared or noted.

**(The meeting ended at 12.58 pm)**

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**CHAIR**