

Decision Report – Executive Member
Decision



Decision Date – 17th July 2023
Key Decision – no

Report Title – Setup of a Standing Panel for Education Standards

Executive Member(s): Cllr Tessa Munt

Lead Officer: Amelia Walker – Service Director, Education, Partnerships & Skills

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Summary / Background

1. Following analysis in November 2022 that showed educational outcomes in Somerset were low and in decline, in March 2023 we launched the Education for Life Strategy.
2. One of the main priorities for the first year of the strategy is to establish better relationships across the education sector, and between education and other Somerset’s partnerships. This includes establishing an appropriate role for members in providing challenge and support for improvement.
3. At present, challenge and support comes through the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee. However, expanding this role is constrained by the capacity of the committee which is already in demand. These proposals seek to provide ongoing extended capacity for members to play this role through the establishment of a Standing Panel on Education Standards.

Recommendations

4. That the Executive Lead Member Children, Families and Education agrees to establish a new Standing Panel for Education Standards, reporting to the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee.

Reasons for recommendations

5. The Education Strategy is focused on the following 5-year goals.

Goal 1 Improved access to **support in the early years** of life so that every child is ready to start school confidently.

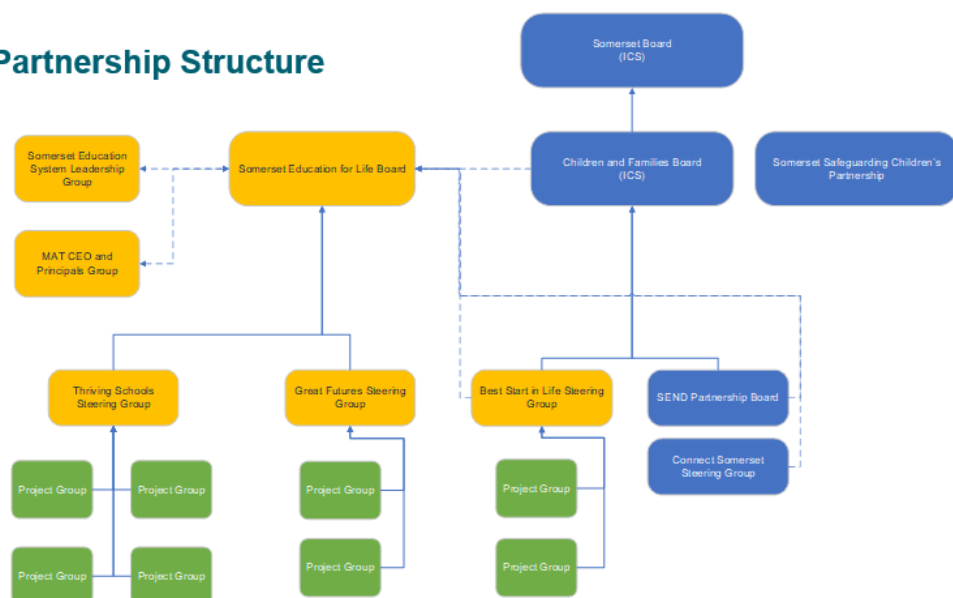
Goal 2 Increased **inclusion in all schools**, settings and in our communities so, every child is included in their education 100% of the time.

Goal 3 Strong and supportive **leadership capacity** within and between Somerset schools so that improvement is sustainable, and educational outcomes are improved in every key phase.

Goal 4 Young people have **access to further and higher education** in the county where they can develop adaptable skills so they can join and progress in the workforce in Somerset.

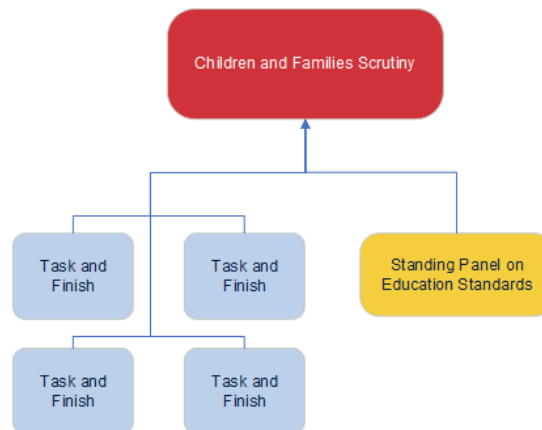
6. A new partnership structure has been established to provide governance for the Education for Life strategy. This structure reports into The Somerset Board. The Somerset Board and Education for Life Board are chaired by the leader of the council, Cllr Bill Revans.

New Partnership Structure



7. The new Standing Panel for Education Standards will report to the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee.

New Member Group



8. The purpose of the Standing Panel for Education Standards is to:

- Review outcomes on a school and trust basis and identify strengths and areas for development.
- Review evaluation baseline and plans for new data collection to strengthen understanding of progress within the system, with a focus on priorities for parents and the public.
- Meet informally with system leaders to scrutinise whether they are receiving appropriate support and challenge in relation to their contribution to overall improvement.
- Review learning themes from independent complaints panel. Note that this is in development and may not yet be operational at the outset of the Standing Panel.

The proposal is that the subcommittee will have between 3 – 5 members on it. All current elected members would be eligible to sit on the panel, though priority would be given to current members of Children and Families Scrutiny Committee. A place on the Standing Panel would be reserved for the Somerset Parent Carer Forum. The new Standing Panel will be Chaired by Chair of the Scrutiny Committee, Cllr Leigh Redman.

9. Political proportionality is not required, however, at least two political groups must be represented, alongside the Somerset Parent Carer Forum for the group to be able to vote and therefore to be able to make recommendations.

10. The current draft terms of reference can be found as Appendix 1.

Other options considered

11. The full range of options considered is set out in paragraph 13.

Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan

12. The Council Plan – 2023-2027 has as one of its priorities: A Fairer, Ambitious Somerset, which reflects the imperative to raise educational outcomes in the county. The Standing Panel is a mechanism to utilise the skills and abilities of elected members to raise awareness of educational outcomes and engage in the process of supporting improvement.

Financial and Risk Implications

13. There are no Finance and Risk implications in relation to the recommendation.

Legal Implications

14. The statutory framework that guides the work of overview and scrutiny in local government is set out in: [Overview and scrutiny: statutory guidance for councils and combined authorities](#).
15. Section (58) sets out the following options for committees to examine topics:

(a) As a single item on a committee agenda

This often presents a limited opportunity for effective scrutiny but may be appropriate for some issues or where the committee wants to maintain a formal watching brief over a given issue.

(b) At a single meeting

Which could be a committee meeting or something less formal. This can provide an opportunity to have a single public meeting about a given subject, or to have a meeting at which evidence is taken from a number of witnesses.

(c) At a task and finish review of two or three meetings

Short, sharp scrutiny reviews are likely to be most effective even for complex topics. Properly focused, they ensure members can swiftly reach conclusions and make recommendations, perhaps over the course of a couple of months or less.

(d) Via a longer-term task and finish review

The 'traditional' task and finish model – with perhaps six or seven meetings spread over a number of months – is still appropriate when scrutiny needs to dig into a complex topic in significant detail. However, the resource implications of such work, and its length, can make it unattractive for all but the most complex matters.

(e) By establishing a 'standing panel'

This falls short of establishing a whole new committee but may reflect a necessity to keep a watching brief over a critical local issue, especially where members feel they need to convene regularly to carry out that oversight. Again, the resource implications of this approach means that it will be rarely used.

16. Option (e) has been selected as the most appropriate option for the following reasons:

- a. There is a need to keep a watching brief on these matters over a considerable period of time.
- b. Members will need to convene regularly in order to consider the topic in full.
- c. Some of the matters the Standing Panel may wish to consider may be better suited to an informal, non-public forum. For example, should the panel wish to discover more information about the plans or activities of an educational organisation, particularly where there may be underperformance or challenges, the Standing Panel would provide a forum for this engagement that would allow discussion without escalating this to a full public meeting.

HR Implications

17. There are no HR implications in relation to the recommendation.

Other Implications:

Equalities Implications

18. The Standing Panel will be expected to consider educational outcomes in a wide variety of ways, with an ongoing focus on the attainment and progress of different groups of children and young people. Particular focus will be given to the experiences of children from diverse backgrounds and the educational attainment of children from low-income backgrounds, particularly those from White British and/or Gypsy/Roma/Traveller backgrounds, and children with special educational needs and disabilities, as these are known to be groups who are least well served within the education system.

It has been agreed with the council's lead for equalities that no Equalities Impact Assessment is required for this decision. This is based on an understanding that the Standing Panel will receive disaggregated information to identify any areas of disproportionality that may inform their recommendations.

Community Safety Implications

19. There are no Community Safety implications in relation to the recommendation.

Climate Change and Sustainability Implications

20. There are no Climate Change or Sustainability implications in relation to the recommendation.

Health and Safety Implications

21. There are no Health & Safety implications in relation to the recommendation.

Health and Wellbeing Implications

22. The overall governance of the Education for Life strategy is designed to enable better joint working between education and health sectors, including in the statutory Integrated Care Service Somerset Boards.

Social Value

23. There are no Social Value implications in relation to the recommendation.

Scrutiny comments / recommendations:

24. The proposal to create a Standing Panel for Education Standards was discussed with the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee on 4 March 2023. The Committee agreed with the proposal and approved the draft terms of reference presented for comment.

Background Papers

25. Further information on the Education for Life Strategy is published on the council website:

<https://www.somerset.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/education-for-life-strategy/>

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Draft Terms of Reference – Standing Panel for Education Standards

Report Sign-Off

	Officer Name	Date Completed
Legal & Governance Implications	David Clark	17/07/2023
Communications	Chris Palmer	13/07/2023
Finance & Procurement	Nicola Hix	14/07/2023
Workforce	Chris Squire	10/07/2023
Asset Management	Oliver Woodhams	17/07/2023
Executive Director	Claire Winter	10/07/2023
Strategy & Performance	Alyn Jones	13/07/2023

Executive Member Children, Families and Education	Cllr Tessa Munt	17/07/2023
Equalities Lead	Tom Rutland	13/07/2023
Consulted:	Councillor Name	
Opposition Spokesperson	Cllr Frances Nicholson	06/07/2023
Scrutiny Chair	Cllr Leigh Redman	06/07/2023