

SCRUTINY FOR POLICIES, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee held in the Luttrell Room - County Hall, Taunton, on Monday 6 March 2023 at 1.00 pm

Present: Cllr L Redman (Chair), Cllr O Patrick (Vice-Chair), Cllr S Aujla, Cllr J Baker, Cllr A Hadley, Cllr B Height, Cllr J Hunt, Cllr J Kenton, Cllr M Lovell, Cllr L Trimnell (substitute for Cllr S Hart), Cllr E Potts-Jones (attended virtually) and Cllr S Carswell (attended virtually)

The Revd. T Osmond (attended virtually) Ruth Hobbs and E Tipper - co-opted members

Other Members present: Cllr T Munt and Cllr F Nicholson

Other members present virtually: Cllr S Hart, Cllr T Munt, Cllr F Nicholson, Cllr M Chilcott, Cllr N Clark, Cllr A Dingwall, Cllr M Kravis, Cllr K Pearce, Cllr G Slocombe and Cllr G Wren

Apologies for absence: Cllr J Snell

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

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

2 **Minutes from the previous meeting held on 16 January 2023** - Agenda Item 3

The Minutes of the meeting held on Monday 16 January 2023 were approved and signed as a correct record.

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

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

4 **Scrutiny for Policies, Children and Families Committee Work Programme** - Agenda Item 5

The Committee considered and noted the Committee's current work programme and outcome tracker and the Executive's Forward Plan of planned key decisions in the coming months.

During discussions at the meeting, it was noted that the next meeting has been scheduled for Thursday 4 May 2023, beginning at 10 am. The meeting dates for the remainder of the Municipal Year will be finalised in consultation with the Chair.

5 **Joint Local Area SEND Inspection Outcomes and update on SEND Green Paper** - Agenda Item 6

The Committee received a report and PowerPoint presentation from the Council's Head of SEND, Claire Merchant-Jones on the recent Joint Local Area SEND Inspection outcomes. The revisit inspection took place between 28 November and 1 December 2022 and the Committee received a copy of the revisit inspection report.

As a result of the re-inspection, Ofsted and CQC judged that the area had made sufficient progress in addressing seven of the significant weaknesses identified during the 2020 inspection. Examples of improvements reported:

- A strong commitment to working together with partners including families to improve area services.
- Sustained improvements to the timeliness and quality of education, health, and care plans.
- An improved autism pathway including a pre-assessment pathway that schools can refer into.
- Improvements in early years special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) services that have helped to improve parental confidence in their children's readiness for nursery and school.
- Development of new enhanced SEND provision within some mainstream schools.

Ofsted and CQC judged that the area had not made sufficient progress in addressing two of the significant weaknesses identified during the 2020 inspection. Examples of further improvement needed:

- Too many children and young people requiring SEND support have a poor experience.
- For those children with an Education, Health & Care Plan (EHCP), too often they do not receive the provision that is set out in their plan.
- The rate of exclusion from schools in Somerset for children and young people with SEND continues to be too high.
- High rates of repeat suspensions and imposition of long-term part-time timetables was reported.

Ms Merchant-Jones outlined the next steps, which are: -

- the area is required to develop and implement an Accelerated Progress Plan (APP) to address the remaining two areas of weakness by Tuesday 21st March 2023. Work on this will be 'at pace.'
- The two-year programme of activity within the Written Statement of Action (WSOA) will end.
- Activities that remain outstanding and a priority will form part of the plan for delivery of the new SEND Strategy that will be published in Spring 2023.

- Governance arrangements to change to reflect closure of WSoA and development of the new Children and Families Board.

Ms Merchant-Jones also provided a brief update in the response to the [SEND Green Paper, published on 2 March 2023](#). This sets out plans to change the SEND and alternative provision system in England.

The Committee made a number of comments, which were responded to at the meeting:

- Question about future inspection arrangements and reporting mechanism for the APP – *Ms Merchant-Jones confirmed that there will not be a revisit or inspection from Ofsted / CQC to assess progress and impact of the APP; a new area SEND inspection framework for England came into place in January 2023 - all areas in England will be inspected under this framework within 5 years – as have an APP, Somerset can expect to be inspected within the first 3 years of this new framework, but not while we are implementing the APP; outlined the changes to SEND governance arrangements - the SEND Partnership Board will continue with revised terms of reference and will report into the Integrated Care System Children and Families Board (and this reports to the Integrated Care System Somerset Board). The SEND Improvement Board will stay in place until the APP is signed off.*
- It would be helpful to have a flow chart showing the reporting mechanism for the Children and Families Board, its terms of reference and membership and how the views of children and young people are represented on the Integrated Care Board. It would also be helpful to receive information on what scrutiny *should* look at.
- Inspection arrangements and framework – would be helpful to get a briefing on this at some stage.
- Congratulated team on the revisit inspection outcomes and progress made – *have made progress especially on strategic work, but still work to be done / impact on families and the focus is on this in the APP.*
- Questions about EHCP and why some children and young people aren't receiving provision – *will identify actions and work around provision in EHCP's; there are number of reasons why not being implemented – can be around skill / understanding on what being asked of schools and capacity in SEND team to check. The APP has a clear action on this and this work is starting immediately.*
- Question about the APP and when it will 'go live' – *confirmed this needs to be submitted by 21 March 2023, the focus is on addressing the remaining two areas of weakness; have year to implement and deliver actions; will be tight / pacey action plan.*

It was AGREED that the Committee receive an update on the new Inspection Framework and the APP in 4 months. The Committee has previously agreed that the SEND Strategy will be come to Scrutiny.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair thanked Ms Merchant-Jones for the update and presentation.

6 'Education for Life' Strategy - Agenda Item 7

The Committee received a presentation from the Council's Assistant Director Education Partnerships and Skills, Amelia Walker on an 'Education for Life' Strategy for Somerset 2023 – 2028.

Ms Walker provided the background context to the development of the Strategy, what steps need to be taken, the implementation plan and outlined the 5-year plan goals, which are:

- 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 and in our communities so every child is included in their school 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.

Ms Walker outlined the year one proposed priorities which are – the best start in life; thriving schools; great futures and how the work will be driven, evaluated, and explained the new governance groups – Education System Leadership Group and Education for Life Board. It was proposed that there be a strong link between scrutiny and the Education for Life Board and that the Committee consider having a Task Group on education standards. Ms Walker also advised about the Somerset Education for Life Strategy launch event which will be held on 21 March 2023.

The Committee made a number of comments, which were responded to at the meeting:

- Question as to whether schools are on board / have been involved in the development – *confirmed that have the Education Strategy Group in place for a year and asked the local authority to lead on developing a strategy. The outline draft went to all the Schools Groups and has been developed as discussions have gone on. Everyone has seen the final draft and everyone appears to be content that it is something that they could sign up to.*
- What has changed and how will this benefit our young people – *haven't before engaged the wider community, schools and strategic leadership (MATs, SAT and so on) to the right degree and it's about relationships and building trust; also, the proposals include formal governance not*

there previously which will help – more structured and transparent. This with smaller projects, done together will show success in those relationships, which will hopefully build trust and confidence and take us to the forward years in a way that can build bigger, more dramatic improvements for children and young people.

- Strategy and relationships with Academies – *it's around the 'community' and power of relationships and connections and mutual accountability. Have contracted the 'Centre for Education and Youth' to build an evaluation framework based on national data and research evidence so that we are able to track outcomes over a period / over the five-year period – will be transparent and will provide hard data. Also mentioned the role of the regional DfE team, to hold Trusts to account; our relationship with the Regional Schools Commissioner needs to be strong.*
- Questions about independent schools, early years settings and middle schools – *advised that Principals from 3 independent schools had attended meeting held the previous week and had been positive meeting, so there is beginning / basis of enthusiasm to work with the local authority; Early Years sector – there are 514 providers and have met and briefed representatives from those communities; referred to 3 tier 'islands' and that whilst not all areas are same, KS2 outcomes are lower and West Somerset pressures are different to Frome's for example.*
- Diocese of Bath and Wells; resources for this and not sure Core Offer is solution – *resourcing is big and complex issue; the Executive member said that she had spoken with the Bishop and the education adviser and is confident will be able to face strained situation financially; make most of resources have.*
- Rate of academisation / concern – *is around making mixed economy work better / shared solution.*
- How is voice of child and young person reflected in this work – *the Children & Young People's Plan reflects verry strong views from children; the Education for Life strategy has involved professional thus far and there is work still to do to connect these.*
- The Committee asked to see the proposed terms of reference of the Task Group on education standards at the next meeting and will then consider how best to link into this work.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair thanked Ms Walker for the presentation and asked that details about the launch event on 21 March 2023 be circulated.

7 **LA Maintained Schools – Core Offer – update** – Agenda Item 8

The Committee received an update from the Council's Assistant Director Education Partnerships and Skills, Amelia Walker on the LA Maintained School, Core Offer.

This outlined the background to the proposals and changes made following extensive reflection and feedback. In terms of next steps, officers have: -

- Met with phase leaders (Wed 1 March)
- Briefings for heads and governors (2/3 March)
- Issuing to individual schools (6 March) – Decision survey; New high-level statements; New 'ready-reckoner'
- Uploading bespoke packages (ongoing from 5 March)
- Deadline for response is Friday 10 March
- Once have responses, will review – seeking 100% sign up following positive responses from school leaders in the previous week. There are some possible mitigations if this is not achieved but remain hopeful can achieve a collaborative consensus.

The Committee made a number of comments and asked detailed questions about the core offer and the changes proposed, which were responded to at the meeting:

- Proposals have changed since were last considered and how will schools cope – *schools have given broad agreement to the principle to core offer and 5%, what has been problematic is the funding.*
- Concern about costs to schools and pleased listened to the feedback; now have concern about the hole in the departments' budget being 'made up' by schools and £350k interest – *clarified that the £350K is a one-off return into budget only and will not happen again so is a 'one year deal' for schools.*
- What will happen if schools don't buy in to this and is there a Plan B / contingency – *have gone from low trust system to trust and will know position on 10 March and will take stock; the Executive member said that she was optimistic that will go through and if doesn't will review the whole budget.*
- Feeling that money is going to bureaucracy, not children – *have identified mitigation if some aren't happy but stressed that support for infrastructure matters; the 5% charge is the right thing to do and if schools don't get support it does end up affecting children.*
- Recognise that conversation have not been easy; now that final figures are presented, is there a risk the schools won't agree; schools be torn between schools budget and the need; pressure of in-year academisation; what is quality assurance (QA) like for the services – *have been very difficult conversations and thanked all those involved; been professional in challenging circumstances; QA – will do with schools; team already bearing fruit; spoke about academisation process (2030 policy was aspiration by government).*
- Schools will already have prepared their budgets and the 29% increase (funding gap) on core offer will have massive implications; need to find another way – *acknowledged have been difficult conversations and perfect storm of pressures – loss of the Monitoring & Brokering grant*

and inflationary pressures; some schools have higher level of reserves and others do not – small surplus is the ideal place to be.

- Schools and local authority are 'between rock and hard place' with this; worried about tight deadline (is it realistic) and query about messaging to schools; top slice if negotiations fail? – *most schools should be looped in and will get personal message; top slice is backstop and would consult school system before did that.*

The Committee requested that this revised offer goes back to the Executive at the first opportunity to allow them to review the changes.

The Committee further recognises the value of the Core Offer for schools and endorses the goals and intended outcomes of implementing the Core Offer whilst recognising the dilemma that has been caused by funding reductions to local authority budgets and inflationary pressures. The Committee highlights its ongoing concerns about how the transition will be funded, for both sides, and the potential funding gap.

The Committee requested that a response comes back to the next meeting in May 2023.

8 **Scrutiny Committee Task and Finish Groups - update** - Agenda Item 9

The Committee received an update on the Task and Finish Groups: -

Sufficiency of external placements

The Committee considered the report which outlined the findings of the Task and Finish Group and supported the recommendations to the Executive member for Children and Families.

Home to School Transport

The Transport Review (Home to School & SEND) will be complete by April and include the Task and Finish Group in deliberations. Richard Hall, who is undertaking the transport review will meet the Task and Finish group to discuss this and a meeting is being organised.

9 **Items for Information - Standing Item** - Agenda Item 10

The Committee noted the following items for information: -

- (a) Email sent regarding '[Government unveils reforms in children's social care](#)' – on 3 February 2023
(the deadline to respond is 4 May 2023 and have added the proposed consultation response to the forward work plan of the Committee)
- (b) Overview of Ofsted annual conversation - slides circulated on 9 February 2023
- (c) Academisation – update - information circulated on 3 March 2023

10 **Any other urgent items of business** - Agenda Item 11

There were no other items of business.

(The meeting ended at 4.05 pm)

CHAIR