

Public Agenda Pack



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 Monday, 9 December 2024 at 10.00 am

Present:

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

Cllr Simon Carswell
Cllr Andy Hadley
Cllr John Hunt
Cllr Frances Nicholson
Cllr Heather Shearer
S Nowakiewicz

Cllr Peter Clayton
Cllr Alistair Hendry
Cllr Marcus Kravis
Cllr Jeny Snell
Ruth Hobbs

In attendance:

Cllr Jo Roundell

Other Members present remotely:

Cllr Sarah Wakefield
Cllr Mandy Chilcott
Cllr Pauline Ham
Cllr Liz Leyshon

11 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from our two co-opted members, the Rev. Tobie Osmond, Church of England Diocesan Representative, and Mary Cox, Roman Catholic Diocesan Representative.

12 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

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

13 Minutes from the Previous Meeting held on 21 October 2024 - Agenda Item 3

Draft minutes from the last meeting held on the 21st of October 2024, were not visible on the website due to a technical error and thus were not approved. Chair recommended that these minutes would be approved at the next meeting along with

the minutes from today's meeting.

14 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

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

15 Scrutiny Committee - Children and Families Work Programme - Agenda Item 5

The absence of the outcome tracker was noted. The Chair explained to the committee that this piece of work is under review to clean it up and make it up to date.

The Chair emphasised the importance of keeping an eye on the Executive Forward Plan and the Somerset Council forward Plans so that the committee members can raise anything that they wish to discuss, in these Scrutiny sessions, since it gives the members of this committee a chance to influence the overall decision-making process.

The Chair also made a request on behalf of the committee to the Executive members that this committee welcomes all opportunities to be a part of any big decisions, should they be brought forward here.

16 Children's Services - Budget Monitoring update - Month 6 - Agenda Item 6

The Chair invited Christian Evans, Head of Business Partnering on the [Children's Budget Monitoring Update](#) for month 6.

The Committee discussed the presentation in detail and the following points were raised and responded to:

- The Chair sought clarity on the unachievable and at-risk elements mentioned in the presentation – national issue where lack of foster carers has led to about 20 children going to residential care, impacting the savings. Similarly, increased unregistered children's placements numbers due to delay in annexes and pods. Huge pressure on the Thrive contracts due to housing stock and increased demands leading to a delay in our ability to move young people towards independent living.
- Unachievable figures are surrounding the virtual school for children which the officer did not feel prepared to talk about due to the Head of Children's Services being absent from the meeting.
- At risk – residential placements – ongoing talks with providers to have lower cost residential services that align with the cohort of children who have a lower level of need.
- How do announcements from Central Government about funding in relation to placements and prices affect our savings? – the officer reassured the committee that this would help us immensely if the Central Government is able to act on these announcements in a timely manner. A national framework would help us by stopping providers from increasing costs. Current indication is that there might be a 40% rise in provider costs next year. We have had feedback on our ongoing work which highlights that we are a preferred authority to work with.
- A member sought clarity on why there is a delay on Homes and Horizons

buildings and if that is the reason for increased unregistered numbers – previously there was a delay in recruiting a Planning Officer which has now gone through, however, if we had been on track then we wouldn't have the unregistered children.

- How is our home to school transport system working? – we have 900 children using this service and all complaints are dealt with in a two-stage review process. We are trying to reasonably bring the children and families to use a more central pick-up point on their registered route. Somerset's work on the home to school scheme has been exemplary and is used as an example of good practice nationally.
- What level of savings, if at all, have come from working with contractors on transport? – Small piece of assurance, there is a trial going on which has led to savings, but we are not rolling it out county-wide just yet simply to make sure it is the right decision in terms of quality and safety of the service users.
- Is there anything that this Scrutiny Committee can do to encourage building implementation of Annexes (Homes and Horizons) faster? – All the planning is out of the way, ongoing discussions with various partners that are working together to agree on dates to get work done surrounding BT, National Grid etc, but delayed due to current weather conditions.
- A member sought clarity on savings elsewhere since the Executive has expressed the need to replace unachievable with "other savings" in the coming months for budget setting – the officer highlighted the difficulty in providing further savings in social care, especially children and families due to immense pressure and there isn't a clear answer so far. The Head of Business Partnering recommended adding a comment on each of the mentioned item on the slides to further clarify progress in the future.
- The budget should be reflective of the real circumstances and not the aspirational circumstances – the lead member for children's services, Cllr Heather Shearer agreed and reassured the committee that she is working closely with and keeping an eye on how the budget is set so this feedback is appropriately shared.
- Mainstream top having costed plans – how are these assessed and who decides that extra funding is required the schools or the council? – Multidisciplinary assessment from the school and the social worker along with the educational psychologist who help decide.

17 Sufficiency Strategy - Agenda Item 7

The Chair invited Phil Curd, Strategic Manager - Head of Education to present the agenda item: [Sufficiency Strategy](#).

The following points were discussed:

- Are there any highlighted concerns with the lack of placement for nursery in early years with the change in legislation? - general concerns across the county, number of funded places required has increased quite significantly and there not enough capital funding to address it in terms of the grant provided. DofE has now launched its new school-based nursery scheme that seeks applications from schools directly so the schools can create their own early years provision to offset some of the insufficiency issues that we're

seeing right across the country.

- We have built into that process a sense check that will allow schools to apply directly and use resources that we think we will need for mainstream school places in the next two or three years. Those applications must come into our early years team and if we approve them, then they can go back to the DofE.
- With immigration as it is at the moment, where are those children going to school and have we built that into our model going forward in terms of school admissions? - we consider the migration in our overall pupil projections and what we do know that in parts of Taunton, because of the NHS recruitment campaign, we are seeing significant movements, but it's also creating a lot of churn in our system. The NHS' accommodation strategy has been to bring those families into central Taunton as a soft landing where they stay for a period of time and then they're expected to move again into a more permanent accommodation. Due to this there's a lot of turnovers in terms of seeking school places where there aren't enough. Which leads to increased appeals because once these families move out, the places open up and often we don't have to do the appeal process.
- It does generate a lot of work for the local authority because we then have to administer all of the appeals, both within education and democratic services. But then the appeals don't progress, and it is considered a waste of our resources. However, this happens in a very specific geographical area.
- Do we have the power over academies as well as we would with our own schools? - academies are their own admissions authorities. They must consult on and publish their own admissions arrangements each year. They have to align with the admissions code, and they have to admit children in line with their own arrangements. Now, if they don't do that and the parent appeals then we will not defend the case on their (academies') behalf. We will make it very clear that this isn't compliant, and it doesn't align with the admissions code and therefore, we would not defend them at the appeal and when that happens, the academy will generally back down, admit the child in line with its own arrangements, but other than that, we don't have any other power. That sits with the Secretary of State.
- Minehead has a lot of housing work going on but none of the funding mentioned in the presentation is reflected to be put towards West Somerset, has that been considered when looking at this funding?

If additional places might be needed in and around Minehead, considering the vast distances that these children have to travel, if they're going to have to go out of the area? - we do an annual sufficiency assessment for early years in which we look at all of those areas in great detail. It's not currently a hotspot. We don't have a shortage of early years places in Minehead as it stands. And if we look at proper school age pupil projection numbers, we continue to see the numbers of children in West Somerset declining. In our main population centres, those numbers are just about holding steady, if not a taper down slightly. But in some of our more rural areas those numbers are falling dramatically.

We are also seeing that in some of our rural primary school areas, the reduction in the numbers of children is creating significant viability issues for some of our primary schools. In September just gone, we have 3 primary schools in Somerset where there was not one new child admitted. So rather than having to create lots of new provision, the question is how do we adjust our schools to make sure they are viable for local

children?

- Our sufficiency duties include older children apart from SEND. When the work sat with early years, there was a tendency to forget about these children. Where are we now? Are we managing to address this in our sufficiency work? – the officers were not clear on what the member was seeking clarity on and was advised by the chair that this would be a discussion outside of the Scrutiny meeting. The lead member reassured that they would come back to the committee formally with this.
- Have we factored in the likelihood of delays based on our experience with DofE schools being delivered significantly late? - we are acutely conscious that we don't have specialist provision currently in West Somerset and we spend a lot of money bringing children from Somerset coast into specialist provision in either Bridgewater or Taunton. We have capital set aside to deliver provision in West Somerset, but we are trying to work with the various stakeholders in West Somerset to realise what the most cost-effective solution could be.
- Based on the maps provided, how many of our spaces going to other Council areas, not Somerset? – one of our key considerations when we're investing our own capital money in creating provision is, are we meeting the need of our local children as in have we got it strategically placed so that a good proportion of our population can access it but also if it is far enough away from the border to deter applications from other LAs as because we have to use our very limited money to meet the needs of Somerset's children first.
- Do we have figures of how many children walk more than two miles to school? - We don't know in terms of children that live within statutory walking distance, we don't know how they get to school. We don't know if they walk or they cycle or they scoot or use public transport or parent drops them off or there's a car share arrangement.
Our primary concern is at what point do we have to make those transport arrangements. So, if a child is over 2 miles or over 3 miles, we have to step in and make that arrangement. So, we're really clear.
- Is there a document anywhere specifically stating the actual schools within that hotspot or is it all of them in Bridgewater and North Pelton, all of them in Burnham High Bridge because it spans over different wards? - This relates to early years pressures, so not necessarily schools that will be looking at child minders, nurseries, preschools, etcetera. There is a document, our annual sufficiency assessment which sets out a sufficiency statement for each of the of the early years' areas.

18 LGSCO complaints directed to Somerset - Agenda Item 8

This item was not presented due to the relevant officers' absence and was recommended that it be deferred to the January 2025 meeting.

19 Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) 2024 - 2030 - Agenda Item 9

The Chair invited Fiona Phur, Partnerships Manager and members of the Somerset Care Councils to present this item: [CYPP - CF Scrutiny Presentation - 9th December 2024](#)

The following points were discussed:

- The committee was very impressed with the work that went into this piece of work and was very supportive.
- The presentation was very well received, and the members emphasised the importance of listening to people who have been through the services and give them a platform to share their voice.
- What does the Pathway for Independence (P4I) look like in 2024? - it was recommissioned and all these young people helped with the recommissioning by working with Commissioners. It has been renamed as Thrive 16 plus. The YMCA's are still predominantly the providers because we don't have a big provider market for the numbers that we need and so therefore we have support workers in place.
- There's a disjoint between what's in the metrics and what the young people want.
- How do you obtain the voice of the child? - the voice of the child isn't about the spoken voice. It's about behaviour, body language. It's about. So, for example, we have what we call the sick and slick creatives because we have young people who really want to say things about their experience of being in care, but they don't want to do the more formal stuff like this. But they'll write a poem or a song, and that's still a voice that's still relevant in terms of how we engage.

20 Items for Information - Standing Item - Agenda Item 10

The Committee noted the following items for information:

1. LGA C&YP Bulletin – October 2024 – circulated on 5 November 2024
2. JTAI – response from the Chief Executive, NHS Somerset ICB – circulated on 5 November 2024
3. [Information](#) on the [Annual Public Health Report 2024/25](#) – a call to action for a smokefree Somerset - circulated on 13 November 2024
4. Inclusion Financial Management & Control - audit report – circulated on 18 November 2024
5. Youth Justice Plan Report & Information on the HMIP Inspection – to be circulated (outcomes from Inspection and action plan will be an agenda item at February meeting).
6. Education item – [Keeping children safe, helping families thrive](#)– to be circulated

(The meeting ended at 12.51 pm)

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CHAIR